

Non / monogamy:

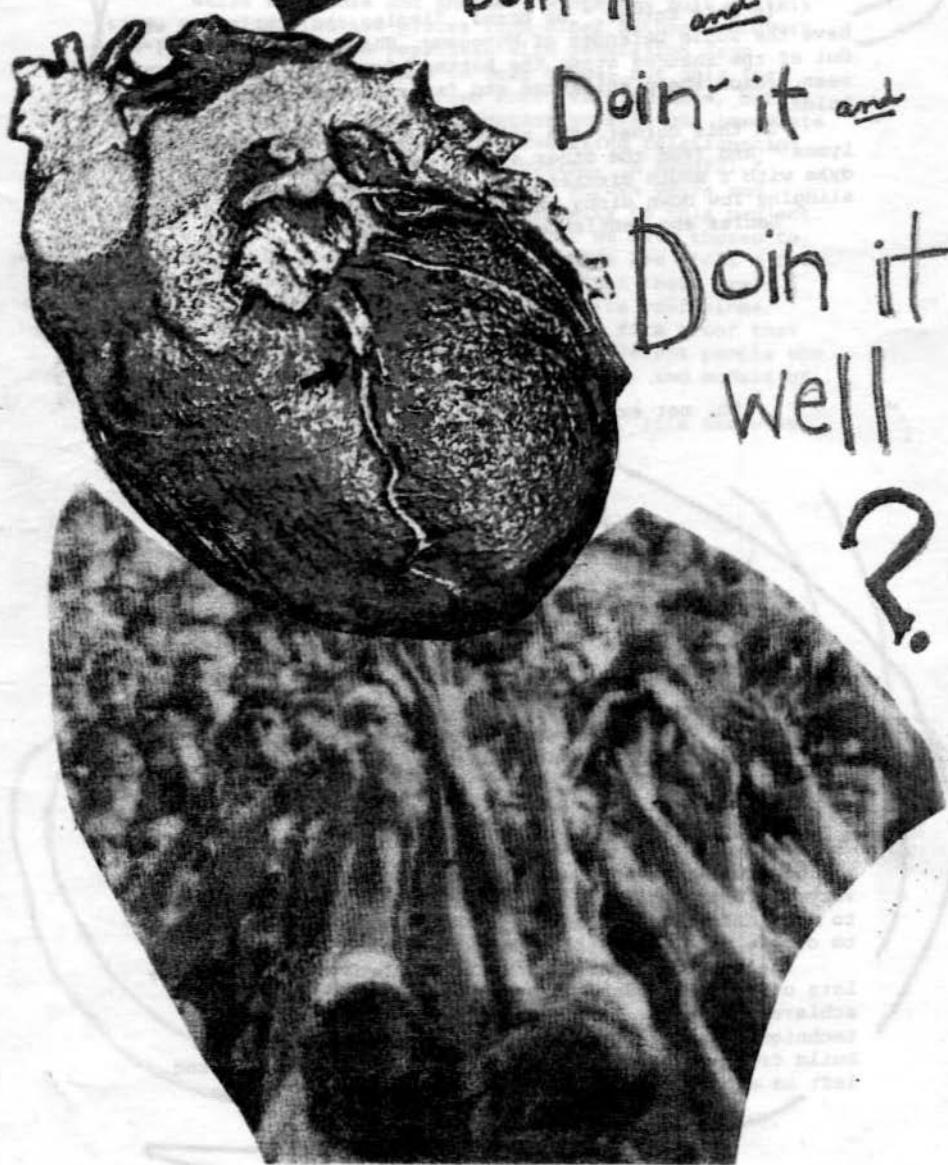


Doin' it and

Doin' it and

Doin' it  
well

?



# INTRO:

Picture it:

A seedy smoky underground lair. In the center of the room, a large roped off stage - a boxing pit. Clustered around the pit are men in fedoras waving hundreds in each other's faces and placing exorbitant bets. Ladies with mink stoles dripping off their shoulders lean in to have their cigarettes lit.

A short, squat man in a garish pinstriped suit steps into the ring.

"In this corner," he booms, "ladies and gentlemen, we have the Noble Defender of Monogamy, Shannon Perez-Darby!" Out of the shadows steps the hottest femme you've ever seen, razor sharp stilettos and fancy pearls made for choke holds.

"In this corner, the riffraff of non-monogamy, Andie Lyons!" And from the other side, comes a sissy librarian dyke with a mouth dirtier than a sailor and a penchant for slinging low down dirty comments like knives.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, place yer bets!"

Uh, not exactly.



Ok, we are super hot and unbelievably fierce. That part is true. We are lovers and we are fighters, and we will hurl whatever necessary to make the space to talk about loving and living in a world that has given us shit for models.

But we're not fighting each other.

We are two radical queer kids trying to figure out how to live our lives the way we want to in Denver. We have had very different experiences, experiences which have led us to very different places. We share an explicit commitment to create safe, supportive and sustainable communities.

The tactics we are using to get there differ, we have lots of ways in which we set up our lives in order to achieve that goal. And sometimes, those tactics and techniques have succeeded and given us a foundation to build from; sometimes, they have ripped us to pieces and left us wondering what to do as we pick up the pieces.

What we have discovered, as far as relationships go, is that resources and conversations that explicitly talk about non-monogamous relationship models are few and far between, and often don't speak to our experience as young, radical queer women. In other areas of our lives, zines have given us an opportunity to talk about hard things, create space to say things people would rather we not say.

We are hoping that this zine will create that kind of space for monogamy and non-monogamy, both in our own radical-queer and radical/queer communities in Denver, and in the broader network of communities across the country.

While we, Andie and Shannon, wrote the bulk of this zine, you will find two pieces from other authors. "Lovers and Fighters" has been reprinted with permission from makezine.org - Thanks loads to Dean Spade, not only for allowing us to reprint his soso smart writing here, but also for giving us a point of contact outside our immediate circle for conversations about radicalizing relationships. Thanks also to Jaks for his contribution, "A Handful," examining the process of non-monogamy across years and lovers. His perspective adds substantially to this project.

It should come as no surprise that we have chosen to write this zine together. After all, there are still a few people left in Denver who aren't aware that there are actually two of us. May this zine, with its confusions, contradictions, and complexities serve as firm proof that we are, in fact, two different people. Different people who want many different conversations, examples, and models of living and loving in the world.

Let's keep living life without models. It's the only way out.

Andie

Shannon



# Everyone <sup>is</sup> a Preface <sup>Indie's justifications excuses</sup> (Sorry mom.)

I kind of thought I was finished coming out.

I know that coming out is a continual and recurring process, ok? So that's not what I mean. I'm not talking about the rare occasions when someone can't take a visual hint and see that I am so obviously a dyke and so they ask about my boyfriend. I, like most other queers, have a handy internal flow chart all set to assess the situation for safety and then proceed as directed. My extended family knows and even feigns openness. I frequently get calls at work to serve on LGBT oriented projects. All the kids I work with know that I like the ladies.

I came out slow and steady - but the end result is a nice and fairly neat integration of my sexual orientation and the politics that accompany it into the rest of my life. I was never one of those super pride homos. I never owned a t-shirt inscribed with, "I'm not a lesbian, but my girlfriend is" and I only managed to sport a tiny pride necklace for two months. Most of the time, my quietness about my queerness had less to do with feeling unsafe or ashamed, and more to do with my assessment about whether or not the people in question actually needed to know that I was a dyke in order to understand me. A lot of the time, I didn't think it was necessary. A lot of the people in my life could understand me well enough without knowing anything about who I fucked or how.

(I want to be upfront about the fact that this is a privilege. While I have and do carry visual signifiers of my queerness, I can also easily pass as straight. The struggle of visible queerness and its political and social repercussions is a conversation better left to other zines.)

All this is to say, I have sort of forgotten what it means to come out, and why it can be a terrifying and arduous process.

Recently, I have begun to come out about my involvement with non-monogamy. You may notice the hedging involved in that last sentence - consider it proof that I am still working on this process. I am not yet able to feel comfortable using an identity label for this part of my life. The reasons for my discomfort are, undoubtedly, tied up with some residual internalized homophobia, and probably a lot of other stupid shit. This zine contains a re-print of a piece I wrote for the Growler Distro catalogue about just that.

I have started coming out about this more formally because I don't feel like I have much of a choice. I have been confronted, both internally and externally, about it a lot recently. I am beginning to realize that this whole non-monogamy thing isn't just a passing fancy in my life - it isn't just a phase. And, keeping quiet about it in a lot of cases means limiting the conversations I can have and the ways in which people know and understand me. Talking about non-monogamy is my next step in being a whole person.



The bulk of this recent confrontation has come from experiences at theological school, which I began last fall. I certainly never would have guessed, when I sent my application into this Methodist school of ministry (I'm a Unitarian Universalist, so I came to class feeling a bit marginalized already) that I would find so many allies and comrades on my non-monogamous quest. I am indebted to two of my colleagues there who have openly shared their identities as polyamorous at the very real risk of professional marginalization and denial of ordination by their denominations.

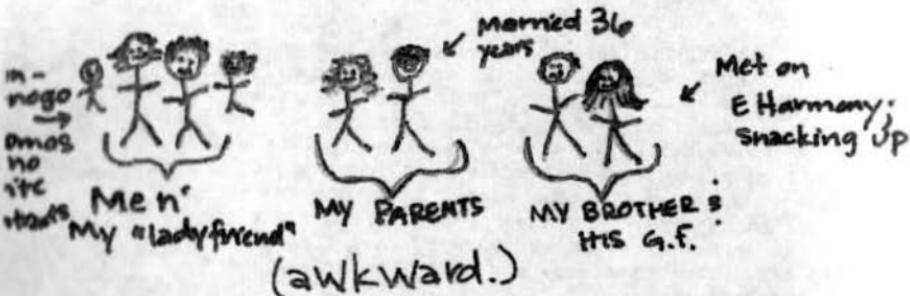
[AND THANKS TO BOB GOSS - SUPER RAD QUEER THEOLOGIAN. PLEASE CONTACT ME IMMEDIATELY IF YOU WANNA TALK ABOUT THE TRINITY AS A MODEL FOR NON-MONOGAMY.]

I also began a "big kid" job (which includes office, business cards and staff happy hours) this fall. For maybe the first time in my life, I have been obligated to attend numerous benefits and business holiday parties that often include invitations to my "partner." Everyone I work with has met my girlfriend, and to her credit, she has kindly obliged their total misunderstanding of our relationship. I have not yet come out to them about our relationship's intricacies, because I don't feel its necessary. Regardless, I have been confronted, in my own head, about the kinds of assumptions people are making about me, and our relationship, just because I occasionally force her to accompany me to professional functions. Really, I'd like to tell them, she's only there for the chocolate fountain.

And, finally, I have been on a quest to make my relationship with my family more authentic and inclusive. After years of not uttering a peep about my romantic life, I finally told my mom I was dating someone this past fall. Since my mother is a wonderful, caring woman who has done her best to raise and understand me despite my propensity to get involved with things she doesn't understand, she immediately wanted to get to know and include my partner in family gatherings. I struggle with how exactly to talk

Andie Lyons

about and reference my relationship when I'm with my parents. I walk a fine line here, since I have often felt (reality notwithstanding) that my family views me as asexual or at least somewhat lacking when it comes to romantic relationship skills. How can I tell them about my relationship, clarify the assumptions they are making, and still convey that my relationship is meaningful and worthwhile? Since I haven't figured that out just yet, they continue to invite M. to family gatherings and buy her long underwear. I'm glad she, at least, is getting something out of the deal.



This zine is how I am choosing to come out. I have always been more likely to let people know who I am via the written word, and zines are a good bet for reaching a far-flung audience. I hope that if you are one of the people who I haven't yet been able to talk to about non-monogamy, that this zine is an entry point for that initial conversation. I hope it gives you some basic understanding of where I am coming from. I hope it buffers the shock.

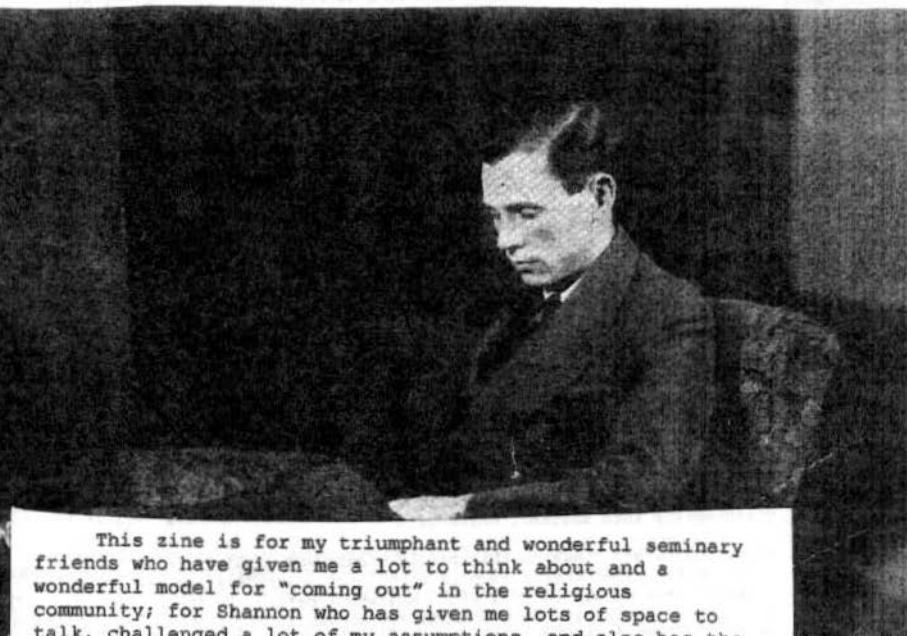
I'm also writing this because when I first began to think about non-monogamy as a realistic option, I had very little in the way of resources to guide me. One of the mantras of the last few years, within my community, has been "we have no models." Many of us are struggling to figure out how to best live our non-monogamous and polyamorous principles, and we have found the support to be rather self-contained. Since our community is already small and tightly bound up, processing can be sticky and stilted. We need not only models of relationships, but also models of how to talk to each other about our lives without doing unnecessary damage.

I do not consider my relationship to be a model of non-monogamy, but I do think that my experiences, and the experiences of other people, can help create a container to discuss and live a non-modeled life. I do not speak for all people who practice non-monogamy, and I am the first to admit that I fuck up all the time, and I'm still well on my way to figuring out how to make this holistic and healthy.

About language: I use "non-monogamous" to describe my relationship. I know and resonate with people who dislike this term because it uses the mainstream concept of "monogamy" to define an "other." However, right now this is the term that I feel most comfortable using to describe my own life. I feel committed to echoing the language choices of marginalized communities, and identifying people as they choose. I would ask the same from you.

I use "non-monogamy" to describe a relationship which is "open." That is, individuals who have meaningful, honest, ethical sexual relationships with more than one person at a time. Non-monogamy of this sort often gets lumped together with a non-monogamy/polyamoury that includes meaningful, honest and ethical relationships involving more than one person at a time (triads, etc.) Since this has not been my experience, I have chosen not to speak to it. I would like to have conversations with people who do live this experience, and I welcome conversation about both of these models of relationships, and others not included in this conversation.

I have intentionally chosen not to lay out much of my actual practice of non-monogamy, and focus instead on the internal reactions and emotions I have living in non-monogamous relationships. I am safeguarding not only my own life, but also the lives of people who are connected to me via a web of relationships (romantic, friendship, communal.) While I understand that it can be helpful to read about the specific negotiations people make in non-monogamous relationships, I am not ready to have that conversation in a public forum. Part of this process is cultivating trust, a difficult thing to do when you open your life up to total strangers.



This zine is for my triumphant and wonderful seminary friends who have given me a lot to think about and a wonderful model for "coming out" in the religious community; for Shannon who has given me lots of space to talk, challenged a lot of my assumptions, and also has the bravery to talk about relationships; to the many people who I have loved fiercely, in monogamous and non-monogamous contexts, and who have deepened my understanding of love and relationships; to the radical community of people I live and love with in Denver, who consistently challenge expectations and ways of living; to the people who have supported me in my sorting out of my life; and to M., the best trophy wife ever - here's to our contractually organic lives.

(? thanks for staying in the boat w/me.)

Love  
(and logical fallibilities)

Originally written for *Already Too Much; Never Enough #1*.  
Maybe a little dated, maybe a little too whimsical. But worth a quick  
read nevertheless.

by andie

I've been thinking a lot about love. Love, in a theoretical abstract way. That's kind of weird for me because I'm really accustomed to thinking and talking about love in more emotionally poignant ways (a la my bohemian faerie Goth inner core.)

I've been talking about love for so long that it doesn't even make sense anymore. Like when you keep saying a word over and over again until it becomes entirely unintelligible and you start wondering why, exactly, those particular sounds ended up being representative of this particular concept. And then even thinking about that is totally ludicrous and your entire thought process is indecipherable.

I mean, the thing is, I don't know if I've ever been "in love." I don't necessarily understand why "in love" is different from, you know, "love." But everyone keeps telling me it is, and I think maybe it really is. But "in love" is a whole lot harder to articulate, or understand or even identify once you're out of it. I've thought I was in love twice before, but now I don't believe it. And maybe that's because it didn't end well. Or maybe I just never was.

I'm pretty sure that I've had my heart broken, or at least stepped on, and definitely sprained, and it seems logical to me that being in love is a pre-requisite for that. But then maybe not. And if I was in love, was it with that person, or just the idea of them, or the idea of them and me, or me with them, or them in context to me?

I think about love a lot not only because I am a bohemian faerie goth or because I'm a writer (bohemian-faerie-goth-writers think a lot about love), but also because love informs my life in a political way.

Figuring out love, who I love and who I've been/will be/am in love with was, and still sometimes is, important to me in deciphering my identity and positioning myself with the queer community. And my position in the queer community informs a lot of my other beliefs, like anti-consumerism, radical gender politics, my feminism, my understandings of bodies and the health industry, my beliefs about communities and their conscious construction, how I understand war and peace and violence. (And maybe that's only because I can't distinguish this from that. Maybe that's because once I start talking about one thing it will always disintegrate into another. Whatever.)

Three months ago I was in this really tumultuous culmination of a relationship. The other person in this relationship was someone who I thought, once, I was in love with, and who I definitely loved and also definitely hated. We'd been friends for a really long time, and my heart had been broken-re-broken a thousand times over the course of 8 years. The funny thing is, right before THE END came crashing down on me, I had decided that being in love or loving or whatever this person, really wasn't a good thing for me. It hurt. It hurt my withered little heart, and it hurt my understanding of myself, and it hurt my

commitments to my politics and my friends. So, it was really good that the end came crashing down. But it still really fucking hurt.

After it ended, I was trying really hard to be a biggirl about the whole thing and have conversations about why this had happened, and how I felt and how he felt. It was a good idea, in theory. We stood in the middle of Race St. (between Colfax and 16<sup>th</sup>) at 3am and had it out in this ridiculous melodrama.

He said to me:

"You have crushes on all of your friends. You've never had a friend you didn't have a crush on."

I told him to get fucked in the ear.

He may be an asshole, but he knows me really well.

And the more I started thinking about that, the more I realized it WAS TRUE. But I was HAPPY that it was TRUE.

*(What are crushes anyway? And are they the same as love? As "in love"? Can they be sometimes and other times not?)*

After all that, I started being really conscious of my construction of relationships, all kinds of them. This was the first time I ever managed to articulate my stance on non-monogamy, and why being really committed to non-monogamy doesn't mean that I sleep around, or that I "take what I can get" or that I'm not committed to people, or in love with people or love people.

I DO have crushes on all of my friends. (If you're my friend, you should know that, I have a crush on you. Let's just out that, okay?) I have a crush on A- because she is a brilliant writer and because she is so much unbearable silly fun, because she doesn't just take my bullshit rhetoric but makes me explain it, because she hugs me like she's got my soul in her fist (and I like it), and because I feel so safe with her; I have a crush on S- because she dances like you wouldn't believe and because she talks about being fat with me in ways that could save my life, because "we could start a revolution in this town if we could get over our awkwardness long enough to get out of the house," and because we're the same, but different; I have a crush on C- because she is the only person I can be genuinely mean around, because she is always thinking about a million things, because she has passion that is almost unbearable, and because she has seen me through my "naive pseudo-hetero youth" and still thinks I'm fun. I could go on. You get it. (I'll tell you why I have a crush on you if you ask.)

I don't want the same thing from all of these crushes. I don't want the same level of intimacy, or the same degree of commitment, however we understand that. I don't necessarily want to make-out with all of my friends, I don't want to date them all (simultaneously or sequentially.) I am very conscientious in defining the boundaries of my relationships, but that doesn't mean I'm not open to change or dialogue. Because the way I love you now is not the same way I will love you, or could love you. I am always open to relationship negotiations. I wouldn't want to engage with people in any other way.

The mythology of "the one", the idea that we will fall and fall hard for someone who is ideal, is bullshit. And it isn't just a problem because it makes it a lot easier to get broken when it doesn't turn out that way. It's a problem because of the limitations it places on all kinds of relationships, because it encourages us to "settle" or just end things when they get weird or hard, because it isn't cognizant of consent, because it doesn't take into consideration the million subtle ways we can love or be loved.

I don't think that this means we have to have a ginormous dialogue about everylittlething. I appreciate spontaneity in relationships. I like knowing what you are thinking just by the ridiculous look you gave me. I like blindfolding you and taking you on secret dates. But I want you to know that you can change the rules any time you want. My response to your changes might be to love you even harder and deeper, and it might be to keep my distance. As long as you know you can change the rules, and that I can choose to keep going or not, we can function and love and be ourselves.

I haven't yet concluded whether it is possible to live within systems we are trying to destroy. Sometimes I think its nothing but sheer hypocrisy to believe we can change the world as we know it while we continue to be participants; other times I can't bear that thought, because there is almost no other choice.

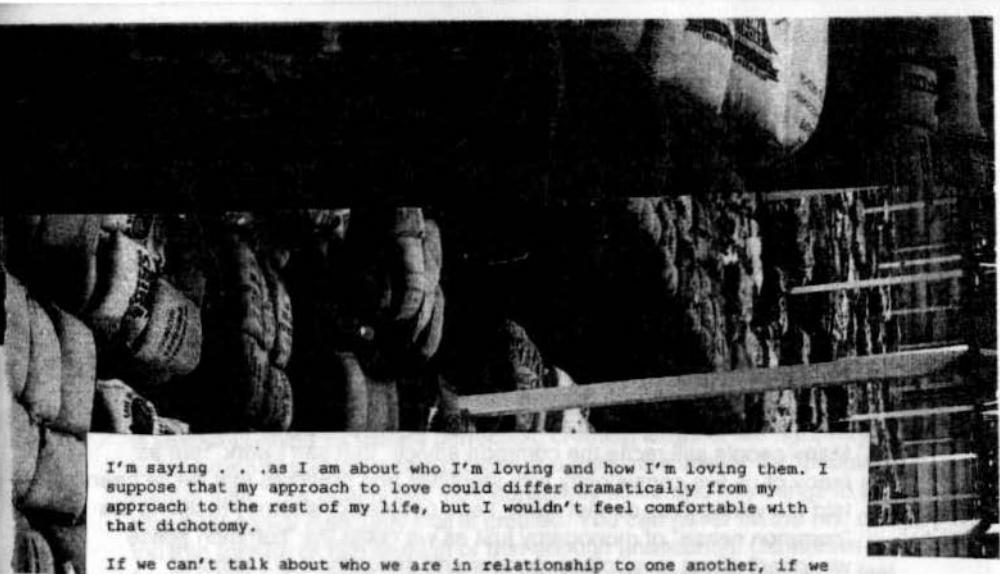
It has been the easiest, but also the most tumultuous, to break down systems around relationships in my own life. Here is the only space I have found where I can both spout my rhetoric and genuinely live it. Sometimes it's hard to live it, sometimes it hurts. But mostly, I can maintain a functionality that eludes me elsewhere.

I often wonder how anyone can maintain a queer identity without also calling into question societal ideals around love, romance and relationships. When the very basis of your relationship runs counter to the mainstream, how can you continue to uphold other elements of that paradigm? People are doing it, though. Everywhere around me, people are doing it. And it's not just to gain entrée into the privileged world of heterosexism; people genuinely believe and feel these things.

I'm not just talking about gay marriage, either, though that's the best example. I am talking about my friends who give up their lives when they start a new relationship because they are just so "in love"; I am talking about the overt fear masked as gentle concern of so many people in my life when I talk about non-monogamy and my participation in it; I am talking about the people I love who seem so desperately sad and lonely because they are not in relationships.

Queering the world doesn't just mean fucking or loving people of the same perceived sex or gender as yourself. There is something distinctly revolutionary in that (still), but its not enough.

The ways I choose to engage in friendships and romantic relationships are indicative of my way of being in the world. I want to create communities (with people I'm crushed out on, and people I really can't stand and people I'm mediocre about) in conscious and accountable ways. I want to be as aware of how I'm spending money/how I'm eating/ what



I'm saying . . . as I am about who I'm loving and how I'm loving them. I suppose that my approach to love could differ dramatically from my approach to the rest of my life, but I wouldn't feel comfortable with that dichotomy.

If we can't talk about who we are in relationship to one another, if we can't decide how we're going to interact in emotional and physical and spiritual spaces, then how in fuck can we talk about anything else in the world? How I love you is immediately informed by and informant upon my experiences in this world. My commitment to you as my friend or lover is reflected in my commitments to justice, peace, community . . .

So maybe I will never be able to say (with any degree of confidence or clout or assurance) that I have been in love, that I am in love, that I will fall in love. Maybe that's because its all muddy and I'm crazy about confusion; maybe it's because I am always and forever in love, that I am continually falling, falling hard.

But I don't care if I've never been "in love", if I'll never be "in love." So far, this has worked, this muddy unclear version, these thin lines between one thing and the next. Its not always what I think I want, its not always what I need. But it works. And that's about all I can ask for.

And, besides, my faerie-goth-inner-core lives well in a state of perpetual poignancy. If I weren't forever falling, falling hard, what in the world would I write about?

I also have a crush on H. because she's so fucking funny. I have a crush on E. because she lets me talk : talk : talk. On B. because she's a brilliant feminist frat boy. On C. because he calls me a "wild beast" : I know that he means it, like he means it all. On K. because he's the flaming media fag of my dreams. On fucking all of you.

Bob and Bass.

## For Lovers and Spouses

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By Dean Spade

In the past five years or so, increasing numbers of people I know have started talking about and practicing polyamory. Queer and trans people in the communities I participate in have been spending more time discussing these ideas together and generating analysis about them. Many people still recite the common advice "that can't work," but as many of us live consistently with identities and practices that we've been told our whole lives cannot work, I see people consistently resisting the "common sense" of monogamy just as we resist the "common sense" we inherit about race, class, gender and sexuality in our culture.

I do not find it to be a stretch to see how interrogating the limits of monogamy fits into the queer, trans, feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-oppression politics that most of my personal and political practice focus on. When I think about this topic, I often start with feminism, where so many of my first political inquiries came up during my teens. I'm always heartened to think about the anti-romantic propaganda of the '70s feminist movement. Have you ever seen any of this? One piece that comes to mind is a poster—a photo of a man and a woman walking hand in hand through a park on a beautiful fall day with pies smashed on both their faces—with text saying something about killing the romance myth below them. I have several very pulpy flexible strong romantic bones in my body, but I've always been delighted by this anti-romance politics (especially in light of recent claims to heteronormative family structure and traditional symbols and ceremonies of heterosexual "love" by the gay marriage proponents).

It was a relief to me to find out in my teens that there were feminists waging a critique of romance. I saw how the myth of hetero monogamous romance lined up to fuck women over—to create a cultural incentive to enter the property arrangements of marriage, to place women in a subordinated position in the romantic dyad, to define women's worth solely in terms of success at finding and keeping a romance, to brainwash women into spending all their time measuring themselves against this norm and working to change their bodies, behaviors, and activities to meet the requirements of being attractive to men and suitable for romance. I see this myth as both personally damaging to people—in how it creates unrealistic expectations about ourselves and each other and causes us to constantly experience insecurity—and also politically damaging because it's a giant distraction

from our resistance and it divides us (especially based on the fucked up self-fulfilling stereotypes about how women compete with each other). Sadly, although the usual tropes are focused around heterosexual romance, much of this gets carried into queer communities as well and surrounds our approaches to sex, love, and romance to varying degrees. It's important to have a critique of the myth of romance that looks at how damaging it is to us in our personal lives, and how it is designed to fuel social arrangements, codified in law, that were invented to subordinate women and make them the property of men.

I also think about this in terms of capitalism in the sense that capitalism is always pushing us toward perfection, creating ideas of the right way to be a man or a woman or a mother or a date or whatever that people cannot fulfill. The goal is that we'll constantly strive and buy things to fill this giant gap of insecurity that is created. You can never be too rich or too thin (greed) or rich enough or thin enough (insecurity). Capitalism is fundamentally invested in notions of scarcity, encouraging people to feel that we never have enough so that we will act out of greed and hording and focus on accumulation. Indeed, the romance myth is focused on scarcity: There is only one person out there for you!!! You need to find someone to marry before you get too old!!!! The sexual exclusivity rule is focused on scarcity, too: Each person only has a certain amount of attention or attraction or love or interest, and if any of it goes to someone besides their partner their partner must lose out. We don't generally apply this rule to other relationships—we don't assume that having two kids means loving the first one less or not at all, or having more than one friend means being a bad or fake or less interested friend to our other friends. We apply this particular understanding of scarcity to romance and love, and most of us internalize that feeling of scarcity pretty deeply.

This gets to another central point for me. One of the things I see myself doing in thinking about this stuff is examining how lots of people I know are really awesome, but then show their worst side, their worst behavior, to the person they date. To that person, they will be overly needy or dependent, or dominating, or possessive, or jealous, or mean, or disrespectful, or thoughtless. I have seen that tendency in myself as well. It makes sense. So much insecurity surrounds the romance myth and the world of shame in which sexuality is couched in our culture, we can become our monstrous selves in those relationships. I also see people prioritizing romantic relationships over all else—ditching their friends, putting all their emotional eggs in one basket, and creating unhealthy dynamics with the people they date because of it. It becomes simultaneously the most important relationship, and the one where people act out their most insecure selves.

One of my goals in thinking about redefining the way we view relationships is to try to treat the people I date more like I treat my friends—try to be respectful and thoughtful and have boundaries and reasonable expectations—and to try to treat my friends more like my dates—to give them special attention, honor my commitments to them, be consistent, and invest deeply in our futures together. In the queer communities I'm in valuing friendship is a really big deal, often coming out of the fact that lots of us don't have family support, and build deep supportive structures with other queers. We are interested in resisting the heteronormative family structure in which people are expected to form a dyad, marry, have kids, and get all their needs met within that family structure. A lot of us see that as unhealthy, as a new technology of post-industrial late capitalism that is connected to alienating people from community and training them to think in terms of individuality, to value the smaller unit of the nuclear family rather than the extended family. Thus, questioning how the status and accompanying behavior norms are different for how we treat our friends versus our dates, and trying to bring those into balance, starts to support our work of creating chosen families and resisting the annihilation of community that capitalism seeks.

I think polyamory has become an increasingly important topic of discussion and analysis in trans communities that I am part of in recent years. In many ways, it makes sense that this would be an area of emergent resistant practices in communities resisting gender norms and breaking gender rules. In loosening our ties to the gender binary, our ideas about being proper men and women often loosen. As our previously strict ideas about our own genders fall away, often, at the same time, we become more experimental with gender and sexual orientation. So people who've always seen themselves in a very particular role, like, say, butch lesbian, and are now questioning that gender association and starting to disconnect biology from gender and think about gender expression more fluidly, might find themselves interested in sexual experimentation with people of different genders as well. I've seen a lot of people who transitioned from lesbian identity to trans man or trans masculine identities wanting to experiment with fag identity, or to screw other trans people or non-trans men. A part of this is about beginning to feel new resistant threads of queer sex in new ways—seeing your body in new ways and feeling like you can do more things with it and then decide what those things mean to you. This is certainly not true for all trans people, but I have frequently seen it.

For people living on the outskirts of traditional gender, being perceived as different genders at different times and coming to find out how subjective gender assignment is, and how fleeting membership in any gender role can be, can generate new feelings of experimentation and increased independence and pleasure. Suddenly, this thing that has

always been a given in our culture—that all people are male or female their whole lives, and that this difference is inscribed by ‘nature’ in our very genes—falls away when some people perceive you as a woman and others as a man, and when gender starts to come apart in pieces: hair, chest, clothing, walk, voice, gesture, etc. Even for trans people who eventually arrive at a stable male or female identity that fits certain traditional gender norms, many still have their image of gender’s stability strongly disrupted by the experience of changing gender and navigating the world from a new standpoint. Others, like myself, who continue to occupy a gender position that defies traditional expectations of either gender and, therefore, get interpreted many different ways for many different reasons constantly experience the instability of gender, and usually have a lot of funny and scary stories to tell about the fluidity of perception.

For some people sex is a place where gender roles get confirmed, and having sex with people and having them perceive you and treat you according to the gender roles you are expressing can be a really wonderful and affirming feeling. When I was first coming out as trans, it meant the world to me to be able to explore my gender by having sex with people who wanted to engage in gender play and who respectfully saw me as I saw myself. For people who are experimenting with gender how they think about or express their own gender, wanting to have different kinds of sex with different kinds of people can be a significant part of that learning process.

In the communities I’m in, this has resulted in lots of interesting discussions. For couples where one person is beginning to identify as trans, it can mean recognizing that the two members of the couple can have sexual orientation identifications that don’t necessarily depend on the gender of the other partner—like a couple where the non-trans woman identifies as a lesbian and a femme and her trans boyfriend identifies as a fag. For some people, too, this has encouraged them to open their relationships so that both members can get the experimentation they want, allowing them to keep being together in ways that work for them and that they really love. For other people I know, who don’t have a primary partner, polyamory means getting to be pervy and dirty with all the people who appeal to them without having to be judged or considered a player or a liar. For people socialized as female, this can be incredibly important. We are raised to think that sexual pleasure is not for us, that to seek out pleasure is to be a slut, that we should be less sexual than men, that sex is a service you give to attain commitment and family structure from men. Moving past that, owning sexual pleasure and being allowed to seek it out is a radical act for everyone in our shameful culture, but particularly for people raised as women who are told to be sexy (for others to consume) but not pleasure-seeking. Radical pro-sex feminists carved out these ideas in

the 1980s, and I see that echoed in the desire of the communities I'm in to embrace sexual freedom and experimentation.

This issue of experimentation and different kinds of affirmation that come from sex also gets to our politics about identity. Shitty liberal culture tells us to be blind to differences amongst people, and stupid romance myths tell us love is blind. But for folks who have radical politics, and recognize that identity is a major vector of privilege and oppression, we know that love and sex and culture are not blind to difference, but rather that difference play a major role in sex and romance and family structure. We also understand that experiencing and acknowledging the identities we live in and are perceived in is important, and finding community with other people who are like us can be empowering and healing. For that reason, a lot of us may want to experiment in those ways, too. For instance, we may be in a relationship we are super into, but then want to have an experience outside that relationship with someone who shares a characteristic with us that our partner doesn't, whether that be race, language, age, class background, ability, trans identity, or something else. Our radical politics tell us we don't have to pretend that those things don't matter, and that we can honor the different connections we get to have with people based on shared or different identities. If we love our partners and friends, it makes sense that we would want them to have experiences that are affirming or important for them in those ways, and not let rules of sexual exclusivity make us into barriers for each other's personal development.

A lot of the things I'm writing here go to the basic notion of what we think loving other people is about. Is it about possessing them, finding security in them, having all our needs met by them, being able to treat them in any way and still having them stick around? I hope not. What I hope that love is—whether platonic, romantic, familial, or communal—is the sincere wish that another person have what they need to be whole and develop themselves to their best capacity for joy or whatever fulfillment they're seeking.

As a jealous person, I'm interested in building love and trust with people that does not hinge on sexual exclusivity, because part of my jealousy, and maybe part of the jealousy implied in the cultural drama repeatedly portrayed on TV of "The Other Woman," "The Affair" and the heartcrushing trust-violating meaning placed on sex outside a relationship, is that desire always exceeds any container—and we all know that from experiencing our own desire. No matter how much we love and want and adore and are hot for our partners, we also experience desire outside that dyad, and the myth of romance (one person out there for each of us, find them, love them, buy things with them and you'll be happy forever), which we're all drilled with from birth

'til death, makes this knowledge terribly threatening. So the point, for me, becomes recognizing that commitment and love and interest in someone else's well being does not necessarily include a deadening of all sexual desire for other people, or trying to unlearn the belief that it does. The point for me is to create relationships based on deeper and more real notions of trust. So that love becomes defined not by sexual exclusivity, but by actual respect, concern, commitment to act with kind intentions, accountability for our actions, and a desire for mutual growth.

And yet, despite everything I've expressed here, I also have serious concerns about the push for polyamory amongst my friends. Sometimes I see it emerging as a new sexual norm, and a basis for judgment and coercion. In some circles I'm in, it has become the only "radical" way to be sexual. Those who partner monogamously, or who just don't get it on a lot, are judged. I also see, perhaps more frequently, the poly norm causing people to harshly judge themselves when feelings of jealousy come up. Having any feelings at all, and especially admitting them, is so discouraged in our culture. We are encouraged to be alienated from ourselves and others, cure ourselves of bad feelings through medication and "retail therapy," and made to expect that perfection and total happiness are the norm while anything other than that is some kind of personal failure or chemical imbalance. This results in a lot of repressed feelings. Many people in the communities I'm in, especially people who have lived through sexual violence and people raised as women in our rape culture, have a hard enough time identifying for ourselves what is okay with us when it comes to sex—what we want, what is a violation, what our real feelings are—and feeling entitled to express them. We certainly don't need more messages that tell us that our feelings related to sex and safety are wrong.

I've been disturbed to see dynamics emerge where people create the new poly norm and then hate themselves if they cannot live up to it. If they are not perfect at being non-jealous, non-threatened, and totally delighted by their partners' exploits immediately then they have somehow failed. I have felt this way myself. Frustrated at how my intellect can embrace this approach to sex and yet my emotional reaction is sometimes enormous and undeniably negative. At times, this has become a new unachievable perfection I use to torture myself, embarrassed even to admit to friends how awful I feel when overcome by jealousy, and becoming increasingly distant from partners as I try to hide these shameful and overwhelming feelings.

This doesn't seem like the radical and revolutionary practice I had hoped for. In fact, it feels all too familiar, like the other traumas of growing up under capitalism—alienation from myself and others, constant insecurity and distrust and fear, self-hatred and doubt and

inadequacy. I do not have a resolution for this dilemma. I only have hopes, for myself and others, and lots of questions. How do I recognize the inadequacy of the romance myth while acknowledging its deep roots in my emotional life? How do I balance my intellectual understandings with my deep-seated emotional habits/expectations? It seems like the best answer to all of this is to move forward as we do in the rest of our activism, carefully and slowly, based on our clearest principles, with trust and a willingness to make mistakes. The difficulty of having open relationships should not be a reason not to try it, but it should be a reason not to create new punishing norms in our communities or in our own minds. We've done difficult things before. We struggle with internalized oppressions, we chose to live our lives in ways that our families often tell us are impossible, idealistic or dangerous, and we get joy from creatively resisting the limits of our culture and political system that are both external and part of our own minds.

One thing I have figured out for myself in the past few years is that this is a pretty slow process for me. Whenever I've tried to dive into polyamory with various partners fast, I've felt terrible and often ended up losing my ability to be with them because of how awful I've felt about my own jealousy. I hate the feeling of having a double standard and being a monster. So now I'm trying to figure out how to have relationships that are not based on sexual exclusivity, but also where I can be comfortable admitting what is going on for me and not pushing myself to be somewhere I'm not—going slow enough to figure out what works and what doesn't. It's not easy and it's still pretty mysterious to me.

Sometimes while I ride the subway I try to look at each person and imagine what they look like to someone who is totally in love with them. I think everyone has had someone look at them that way, whether it was a lover, or a parent, or a friend, whether they know it or not. It's a wonderful thing, to look at someone to whom I would never be attracted and think about what looking at them feels like to someone who is devouring every part of their image, who has invisible strings that are connected to this person tied to every part of their body. I think this fun pastime is a way of cultivating compassion. It feels good to think about people that way, and to use that part of my mind that I think is traditionally reserved for a tiny portion of people I'll meet in my life to appreciate the general public. I wish I thought about people like this more often. I think it's the opposite of what our culture teaches us to do. We prefer to pick people apart to find their flaws. Cultivating these feelings of love or appreciation for random people, and even for people I don't like, makes me a more forgiving and appreciative person toward myself and people I love. Also, it's just a really excellent pastime.

I do not have a prescription for successful relationships, and I don't think anyone should. The goal of most of my work is to remove coercive mechanisms that force people to comply with heteronormative gender and family norms. People often get confused and think that me and other trans activists are trying to erase gender and make everyone be androgynous. In fact, that sounds a little boring to me. What I want to see is a world in which people do not have to be criminalized, or cast out of their family, or cut off welfare, or sexually harassed at school, or subjected to involuntary mental health care, or prevented from getting housing because they organize their gender, desire, or family structure in a way that offends a norm. I hope we can build that vision by practicing it in our own queer and activist communities and in our approaches to ourselves. Let's be gentle with ourselves and each other and fierce as we fight oppression.

## Loving it/ Hating it

By Shannon

I feel like the non-monogamy hater, which I'm not. I think part of that perception is that I've recently had a lot of pain around the issue of non-monogamy, a relationship that ended and one of our hardest points was monogamy/non-monogamy. I really don't hate non-monogamy. I actually really deeply believe in its theory. The idea that there is enough; enough love, enough resources, enough attention, enough companionship, enough sex is essential in my process of healing through all of the lessons that we're not enough (especially as a fat, queer, mixed, Latina, femme). I want to dissect all of these pieces. I want to find the places where theory and practice meet. I do feel the pressure, like you're not really radical enough if you're not in an open relationship. I know we know better than this, I know that the theory and drive around non-monogamy is so much about wanting to find ways to all be enough and to unlearn our shit around ownership and "one true love", the idea that there's one other person out there that completes us. I don't believe that. I'm often asked why I do romantic/sexual relationships and the best answer I have is to learn. For me it's all about the process, about learning and growing. But that doesn't stop the internalized hurtful messages either; that if my partner sleeps with someone else that means I'm not enough. There's a piece of me that still believes this.

Most of my sexual relationships have been non-monogamous. Most of them have not had formal structure and language to that non-monogamy. In my last relationship I was interested in being in a committed monogamous relationship. That was about a lot of things. For me it's the difference between sometimes and regularly. Open relationships where one or both of us sometimes hook up with other people feels ok. There's a level where that doesn't feel overwhelming or overly threatening. But when one or both of us wants to regularly sleep with other people suddenly that becomes too much. And I think that's about the different ways we all experience and express our sexualities. Who am I to police the line between sometimes and regularly?

When I'm asked why I need to be in monogamous relationships at this point in my life I have a couple of responses. First off is that it takes a lot of work for me to have sex with someone and feel safe and present in my body. That work can be so encompassing. Right now, that work is so much that I can only really do it in a committed monogamous relationship. My definition of casual sex is a sexual encounter with someone with whom I'm not engaged in emotional work. I can and have had casual sex. What I'm finding more and more is casual sex pulls me away from myself. In order to take on all of the stuff that comes up for me during casual sex I have to shut off pieces of myself. My general goal is to be a whole person, to be as much of my whole

self as I can. With that in mind it feels counter productive to engage in sex that makes me feel far away.

I know when I frame it like that most people in my communities have my back. Especially communities that have body politics, understanding that so many, if not all of us have gotten really complicated and fucked up messages around our bodies, be that around gender, body image, fat stuff, race, ability and so on.

I want to figure out where all of this breaks down for me. I experienced a lot of jealousy in my last relationship but I wouldn't say I felt more or less jealous than in other relationships. I know that one of the pieces of non-monogamy is not that there isn't jealousy but that we work on our jealous responses. It makes complete sense to me that no matter how much we are turned on by our partners, how hot, sexy and beautiful we all are that there are desires that exist outside of that. But my desire to be a whole person outweighs my desire to sleep with multiple people over the same period of time. Of course I had sexual desires outside of that primary relationship but what I didn't have was the time, energy and agency to pursue them.

The other pressure I feel around non-monogamy is that it feels like somehow kinky and non-monogamous go hand in hand. Like if I want to find other kinky partners I have to be willing to be in an open relationship. And actually I am willing. I want it to work so badly. I want non-monogamy to feel like the theory sounds. I want to feel whole in that space, unconditionally loved, supported. I want the communication that I believe has to go with committed open relationships. But it doesn't feel like that, or more accurately it hasn't. Even writing this now I think "Sure I can do this". And I've tried, I've tried everything I know how to find ways to make non-monogamy work in my current communities. I keep looking for ways that are sustainable for me. It's only fair to make clear that my most recent work has been within one long-term on-again-off-again primary relationship. Maybe it was just our particular dynamics, how we fit together, the differences in the way we experience and practice our sexualities.

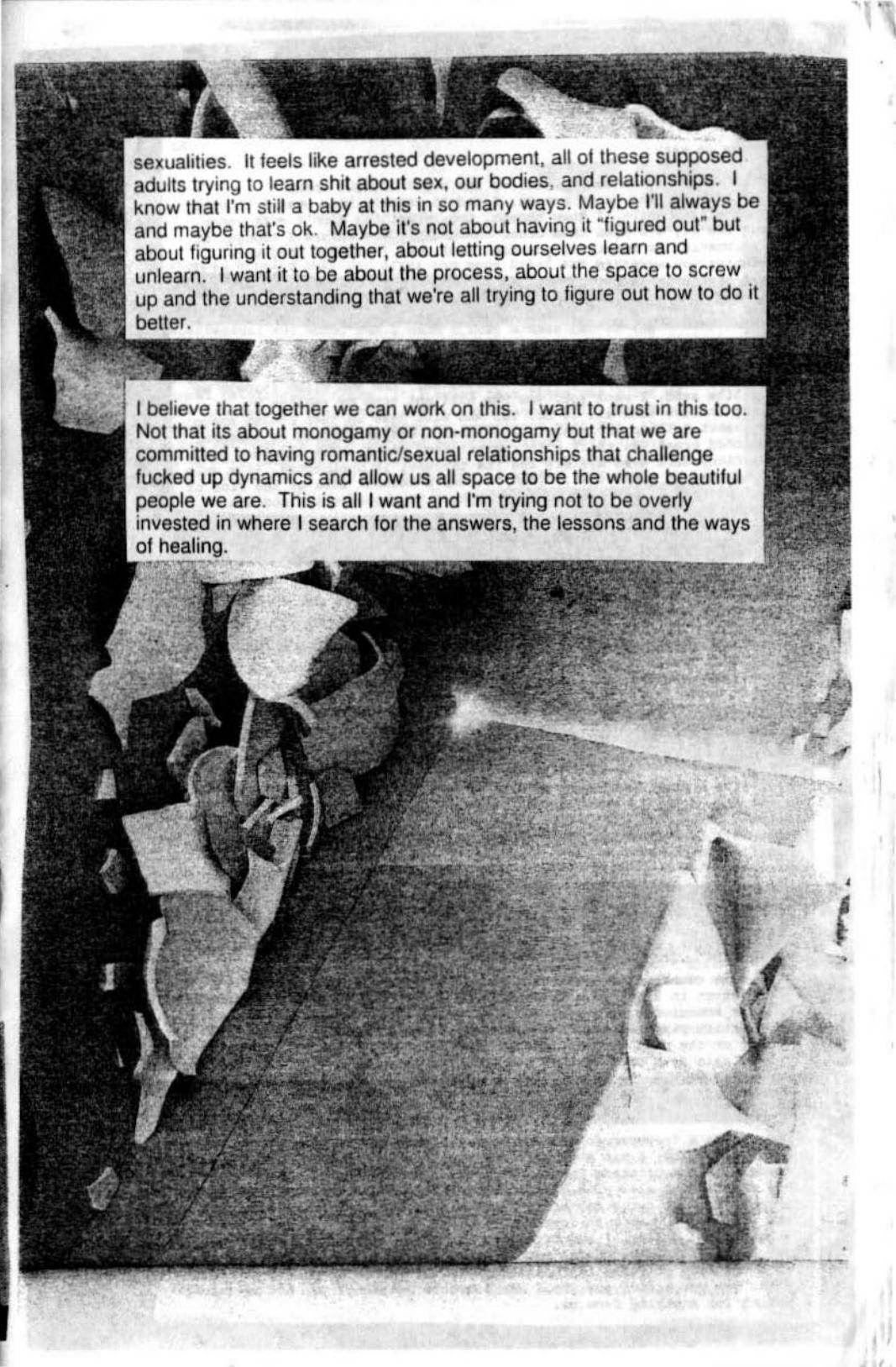
I also believe that there's something bigger happening here too. I truly believe that the only way non-monogamy works is if both people are engaged in similar matched ways (whatever that means for them). I think the power has to be balanced in broad ways, which I know is a whole other essay. (How do we define balanced? In a racists, classist, patriarchal, homophobic, abilist, transphobic, fat phobic society how can we find balanced power with intersecting identities and shifting understandings?) For example, I don't think it really works when one person is sleeping with other people and the other isn't. And I'm speaking broadly here because I also trust people to work this out for themselves. I'm hard pressed to think of a scenario where that would work (especially for me) but that doesn't mean it's not possible.

That's where I hit the wall in my practice of non-monogamy. I wanted to explore sleeping with other people; in my head I can see all of the possibilities and opportunities to explore different aspects of my sexuality. In reality it feels like my only available sexual pool is a community of people who have all slept with each other. Everyone is someone else's ex. As a broad community theory model I believe that communities self implode when they don't have new energy, members, ideas and dynamics entering them. Without new stimulus a community eventually eats itself up. That doesn't mean the new stimulus can't come from within, but without new ways to learn and grow, eventually the members will feel stunted and leave.

It also taps into larger identity issues, one of which is being femme. As a fat femme radical queer in Denver it very much feels like the people who include me in their sexuality are an extremely limited group. Where do I have spaces to express and own my sexuality as someone who's doing femininity? How does this tie back into issues of visibility, the fear that having a public sexuality means that automatically that sexuality belongs to someone else? It feels like there are only so many options. And I think it's important to talk about the access for folks doing masculinity to modes of visible sexuality-how the most accessible forms of masculinity are based in misogyny. What's the relationship between misogyny and non-monogamy? How does this play out in our queer and trans communities? Even when folks are actively working on anti-misogynistic expressions of sexuality where's the agency and public space to express these forms of masculinity? I want to make it clear that I don't think there is any inherent connection between non-monogamy and misogyny but I do think there are ways in which we are taught about sexual exclusivity and sex outside of our primary relationships that both rely and feed on misogynist narratives. As someone doing femininity in my queer communities my sexuality is still filtered through the gaze of others. How can I find agency to express and engage in sex with people other than my primary partner when my sexuality is constantly filtered through other's perceptions?

When the people I'm in sexual relationships with are queer folks doing masculinity my experience has often been that we have a different access to sexual partners based on a lot of things. There are no easy answers here. What I'm not trying to do is set up a hierarchy that says that monogamy or non-monogamy is harder or easier for anyone. But I do think we all have different kinds of access to non-monogamy based on who we are, where we are and what kinds of sexualities are prioritized in our communities. Our multiple identities play into our relationships with non-monogamy and monogamy based on a slew of interconnected (power) dynamics.

Who feels like enough when it comes to sex? Again, there's all of this crap around conditioning, especially for a lot of my queer peers who went through their teens, often early twenties and beyond feeling like they didn't have avenues to accurately or fully express their



sexualities. It feels like arrested development, all of these supposed adults trying to learn shit about sex, our bodies, and relationships. I know that I'm still a baby at this in so many ways. Maybe I'll always be and maybe that's ok. Maybe it's not about having it "figured out" but about figuring it out together, about letting ourselves learn and unlearn. I want it to be about the process, about the space to screw up and the understanding that we're all trying to figure out how to do it better.

I believe that together we can work on this. I want to trust in this too. Not that its about monogamy or non-monogamy but that we are committed to having romantic/sexual relationships that challenge fucked up dynamics and allow us all space to be the whole beautiful people we are. This is all I want and I'm trying not to be overly invested in where I search for the answers, the lessons and the ways of healing.

Easy

It came so easy.

I didn't know there was a name for the way I thought about relationships, and to be honest, I didn't exactly know what I thought about relationships. I knew though, that something didn't make sense about the way I'd seen them done, though this was before I thought of relationships as something you did. Back when I assumed they were something you were "in."

I wrote a poem when I was 20, before sex radicalism had captured my fancy, and I was still dealing with coming out (which did not come easy.) "I want a forever lover," it started, "one who slips through my hands like sand. I want you, you who will not stop my reality by falling in love with all of me. You who will take up just enough space in my heart to keep me lovely." The ideal I was attempting to capture in clichéd prose was thick with romanticism, and I think involved café revolution, dark eyed mystery and the carousel in Montmartre. (I'm only half ashamed to admit that.) Then, it was a nascent idea of the kind of love I wanted, a love I could only capture in a particular context.

It would be years before I would name a relationship I was in "non-monogamous," years before I started articulating what exactly I meant when I said that word, years before it was done ethically.

But every relationship I've ever been in has been non-monogamous. Sometimes, it's been non-monogamous in detrimental and fucked up ways, the way non-monogamy is frequently done (though usually it isn't called by that name.)

Maybe it's a stretch to call my first loves non-monogamous, but whether or not they meet the textbook definition of non-monogamy (or even, the textbook definition of relationship) doesn't matter. They laid the groundwork for the relationships that would come later. They reified what I maybe had always known to be true: no one can be everything to someone.

In some cases, I have been the dedicated and committed partner who is forgotten in light of a more exciting love. Sometimes, I've been the other woman, the home-wrecker. I've gotten hurt, and I've somewhat willfully participated in the hurt of others. I don't take either my pain or the pain of other people lightly. I don't think that any of this pain is a case against non-monogamy.

When I was a freshman in college, still living out my attempts at naive heterosexuality, I met a guy named Ben. Ben was older than me, a student at the Colorado School of Mines. I was impressed mostly with his smarts, but also with his direct and straightforward approach to things. We went out a few times and had some mediocre oral sex. I liked the guy, but I wasn't in love with him by any stretch of the imagination. Mostly, I was trying to prove to myself that I could be the kind of girl that dudes want to sleep with, and that I could sleep with the kind of dudes that girls who like dudes are supposed to sleep with. Ben was a nice guy who I was somewhat attracted to, and he wasn't asking for anything from me.

I found out a few months after we first met that he had a girlfriend. I found out because he stopped calling, and I wanted to know why. Turns out things had been a little rocky with the ol' GF, and he was exploring other options. He had concluded that he liked both of us. How, exactly, did I feel about that?  
I felt ok.  
His girlfriend did not.

So we stopped hanging out, and after one more brief and utterly disastrous foray into heterosexuality, I cut my losses and headed for queerdom. I assumed my entrée into this world would include relationships that more directly reflected my ideals. I may not have been heterosexual any more, but I hadn't lost a damn bit of the naïveté.

Ben was my first "real" experience with a framework that didn't fit traditional relationship norms. I'll grant that there was a lot of deception involved in this relationship, and also a fair amount of patriarchy. When I told people about my experience with Ben, they called him an asshole and mentioned something about boys always wanting to have their cake and eat it too. Which is probably a fair assessment. Thing is, I couldn't blame him. I wanted that too.

The question is why I want that, why I want it enough to limit my small dating pool even more, want it enough to feel pretty awful sometimes, want it enough to make both friends and acquaintances shudder when they consider my relationship. Why did it make so much sense? Why is that the set of sacrifices I'm willing to make, instead of the more traditional ones? After all, plenty of people want to be doing it with people other than their partners. They sacrifice that in order to have a single meaningful romantic relationship. And no one thinks they're nuts.

I've been thinking a lot more about why recently because the lines of non-monogamy have become blurrier as time has gone on. I've even entertained (briefly) the idea that maybe this whole non-monogamy thing is just one of the last vestiges of my ever-dwindling radical life.

My parents have been married for 26 years. They have never cheated on each other (at least not that I know of, and I genuinely believe this to be true.) My mother filed for divorce at least twice, and kicked my dad out numerous times. My father lost his license to practice pharmacy, his career, and lots of jobs. My mother has sacrificed, in the name of this marriage and this family, thousands of dollars, her own sense of emotional and financial security, and nearly, relationships with both my brother and me.

I love my parents a lot, and I cannot wish that they had split up. Wishing that is tantamount to wishing for my father's death in my adolescence, my mother's fear and pain, and probably a lot of other shitty stuff. It isn't important what could have been if those divorce papers had been filed or my father had ended up on the street dying of alcohol poisoning. What is important is the lesson I learned about love, about relationships.

I learned that you can become dependent upon someone, for love or emotional support, for validity, or for their skills with power tools,

yard work and cars. You can become dependent on someone slowly, and then when they fuck up, fuck up bad, you can become paralyzed with fear about what your life will be without them. You can lose sight of the reality that other people love and support you, you are validated in numerous aspects of your life, and you can learn how to operate a drill and change the oil. That fear can keep you feeling shitty, can allow the other person to keep fucking up, can destroy other parts of your life. And you'll stick with it because it's a shitty you know, and the fear of the shitty you don't is too much to take.

And I translated this lesson into a kind of self-sufficiency that is isolating. The caution in the cautionary tale of my life was this: don't ever depend on anyone for anything. They will fuck up and you will be trapped. So I've done everything I can to take care of all of my needs by myself. I always have my own way home. I don't ask for help even when I should. I date people who I can distinctly place into neat boxes in my life. Should they need to be excised, they can. Easily. I reframe this to sound much sweeter, more realistic, and rationally thought out: No one can be everything to someone. In my life, I take it a step further: No one can be anything in your life.

This framework has hit hard against my politics of and investment in intentional community. I've never lived in a community house because the idea terrifies me. It took me months to admit that I needed help overhauling my hub. I spend a lot of time crying by myself.

I face this discrepancy on a daily basis, and I've worked hard in the last few years to ease it. I've let people in more, and in more authentic ways. I've started asking for help. I become a more visible part of the Denver queer and activist communities because I want to face those fears regularly. I've found, in this process, that the two can be integrated. I've had to learn reliance on the community, but having an extended network means that when one individual can't show up, others can. And I've found that a lot more individuals show up than I originally thought.

Non-monogamy never posed this problem. I never really had to rely on anyone, because I gave them such limited access to my life and my self that even if they fucked up, it didn't matter. I kept my options open and my relationships as casual as possible. Very few people ever got in deep enough to cause me to feel any real loss when they left. Those that did only verified my commitment to this ideal. I had been hurt, clearly, because I had relied on them too much.

And, too, I sort of figured that non-monogamy was maybe the best I could do. I think I decided pretty early that no one was ever going to love me truly madly deeply. Non-monogamy was cutting my losses. Lowering my expectations. Safeguarding my fragile heart.

Of course, nothing is as simple as this. My propensity towards non-monogamy is more involved than having watched my parent's marriage and its struggles. But I can't ignore the influence that seeing that relationship and feeling its reverberations must have had on me.

Those motivations aren't healthy ones. They do not lend themselves to an ethical practice of non-monogamy. I'm glad I discovered them, though, because with any luck it will mean that I can start undoing

them, or at the very least, be aware when they show up. They got me here though, to a place where non-monogamy is a system that, for the most part, meets my needs and provides a container in which I can exist and try to figure shit out.

Right now, I'm struggling with the reality that my very intentional non-monogamous relationship is no longer the neatly parceled package that it once was. Because it has been colored with community politics, dealt with via near excessive processing and endured through seasons of shitstorms and hurt feelings, it has become intense and deep. It has started informing lots of things in my life. I have, in many respects, become dependent upon it, and upon the other person involved.

I'm pretty scared.

I have to reframe and reconsider my intentions, my goals, and my practice of non-monogamy. I'm scared of that too.

What happens when you realize the system you constructed to keep yourself from dealing with love hasn't actually saved you from the pain and vulnerability of love? How do you keep the positive parts of communication, boundary setting, and independence when everything and everyone around you is saying, "love is whole and complete and good. You don't need anything else"?

But while I was doing this out of a fear of dependency, I have learned that there are other great things about non-monogamy. There is freedom. There is accountability - being held to it and holding others to it. There is agency. There is space. When things go wrong, I can't blame them on love. I have to be honest about what I did, what I feel, and where I'm at. Love can be a piece of my life without consuming it. I am a part of a larger web of relationships, all taking care of each other. I have enough of my heart to keep my reality.

The concept of non-monogamy may have come easy, but living into the practice is another challenge altogether. Whatever experiences may have predisposed me to this practice are at war with a world that believes in an entirely different system. The contradictions posed, both internally and externally, are daunting.

They are worth facing. So that I can maintain relationships that are important to me, but also so that I can be engaged with the systems at work in my life, and engaged in challenging them. So that I can personalize the impact of those systems, and understand the ways in which either pain or love can grow from them. I want to hold onto my heart, but I want to give what it produces to the world; I want you to keep what you need, but I want to see the reflections of that in the ways in which we live. I want to hold on to just enough of each other to keep us all lovely.

# A HANDFUL: EXPIERIENCES IN NON-MONOGAMY.

by: jaks

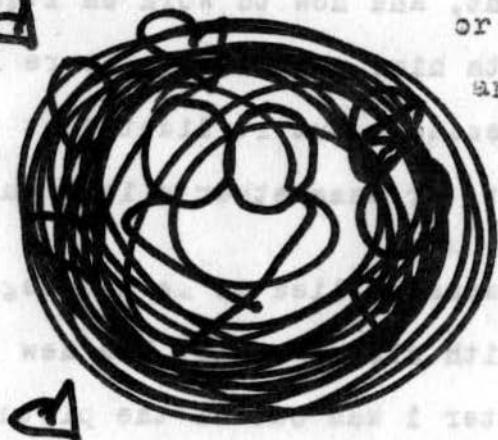
... the first time i heard the words poly\*

non monogamy\* polyamory...etc. i was about 17 or 18, i was on a date with a friend of a friend (we'll call her M)... M was about 6 years older than me \*\*\*\*\* when i met her, and i had driven from my college dorm room to ithaca, an hour and a half away to meet her. we were chatting about how

we had both just gotten out of relationships and what we were looking for etc. she then asked me if my last girlfriend and i had tried polyamory... i looked at her and was like..uhm i think so... (thinking it was some sort of sexual position of some sort.) did i mention how nervous i was? seeing as this was the first date i had gone on where the only name she knew me by was jaks? anyhow, she laughed a little and gave me a basic definition of poly. and some sort of epiphany hit me in that hippy filled vegan restaurant. so i said no, but it sounds like the thing for me. i began seeing M for a little over 6 months that night and embarked on my first poly relationship (s)... the rules were simple in this one. we never defined each other as my primary partners although i saw her more than anyone else in that time period. the biggest and most basic rule for us was safety. there was to be no fluid contact between us or our other partners unless negotiated. the second rule was that we were to inform the other if we began seeing someone else that was more than a

had to do with sex and the  
xxx xxxxxxxx one night stand. the third rule that  
went along with the first rule was that we had  
agreed to get tested every three months. the fourth  
fourth rule was that if anything was changing  
for either of us...feelings etc. that we must  
discuss it with the other immediately. and that's  
how it began for me. i would see M about 2 or 3  
times a month and carried about my own business  
backhome. i date several other people and slept  
with many more in that time period but it never  
really got complicated because M was the only  
person i saw for more than a month. that was until  
we went to true spirit together in DC and i met  
L ... L also lived in ithaca and was the first  
genderqueer xxx masculine identified person  
that i had found myself attracted to. we spent  
a lot of time eyeballing each other that weekend  
and didn't do anything about it until a make out  
party the last night we were there. (can i  
just say here that those type of things seem  
to be just a big fucking recipe for disaster in the  
queer community?) anyhow... make out party:  
true spirit....

i met some of my closest friends at that party and had two serious relationships with people there after the fact. even one of the attendees was my roommate for a year. it was the first time that M and i had been affectionate (...) with other people in front of each other before.



and i got

B

A

jealous even though i was doing the same damn thing going back to our room that night i realized that i had broken the fourth rule. i was expecting more than what we had agreed upon ... at least that was my thought then. M and i broke up but remained close friends about a month later and that's when i began seeing L. i would and could never say that the way we did poly stuff was perfect. but it was the most ideal situation

situation thus far. we only lived in the same town for a couple of months, we were primary partners, that after 6 months became fluid bonded. we talked about our other relationships and one night strads freely. i learned what my jealousy meant, and how to work on it and with it when i was with him. and like most relationships this one ended. but it didn't just end because we grew apart, or some other cliche bullshit

...

it ended because he lied to me and began having unsafe sex with his roommate. his new primary partner after i was out of the picture.

this didn't stop me from continuing to pursue other open relationships. but rather i looked more closely at what i wanted from a relationship... of any kind.

now, i'm not going to go into detail of every non monogamous relationship i have ever been in but when my friend spd asked me to contribute to this zine, i wanted to talk about where it began and where it ended. or is. or is about to end. because at this current juncture in life i can't really say where i stand on the issue of polyamory.

im also here because i want to own up to my shit  
fix and my fuckups. because i've certainly made  
plenty. a little over a year ago i got married  
under the pretenses that we would remain monogamous.  
and for the most part we did. in theory.  
what i didn't realize or perhaps subconsciously  
ignored was that my partner had changed. and  
therin lies communication problems. you can't  
be in a monogamous relationship with the serious  
communication problems we had. let alone be able  
to withstand a relationship where there isn't too  
much resentment. things begin to

fall

apart.

and then the lies start. and then you can't  
even share space. even. though. you. live. together  
and when this started to happen. and when things  
began to really fall apart. i ruined what would  
have been an awesome friendship. .. and i don't  
think i've ever really said sorry for that.  
but i am.

but what i am most sorry about was what i did  
to my partner. because even though she could

to talk to me about it, i shouldve known... even from as simple thing as body language.

but there we both were trying to play it cool. trying to be that mon monog couple that made it work.

it didnt work.

... but i'm still working on it...

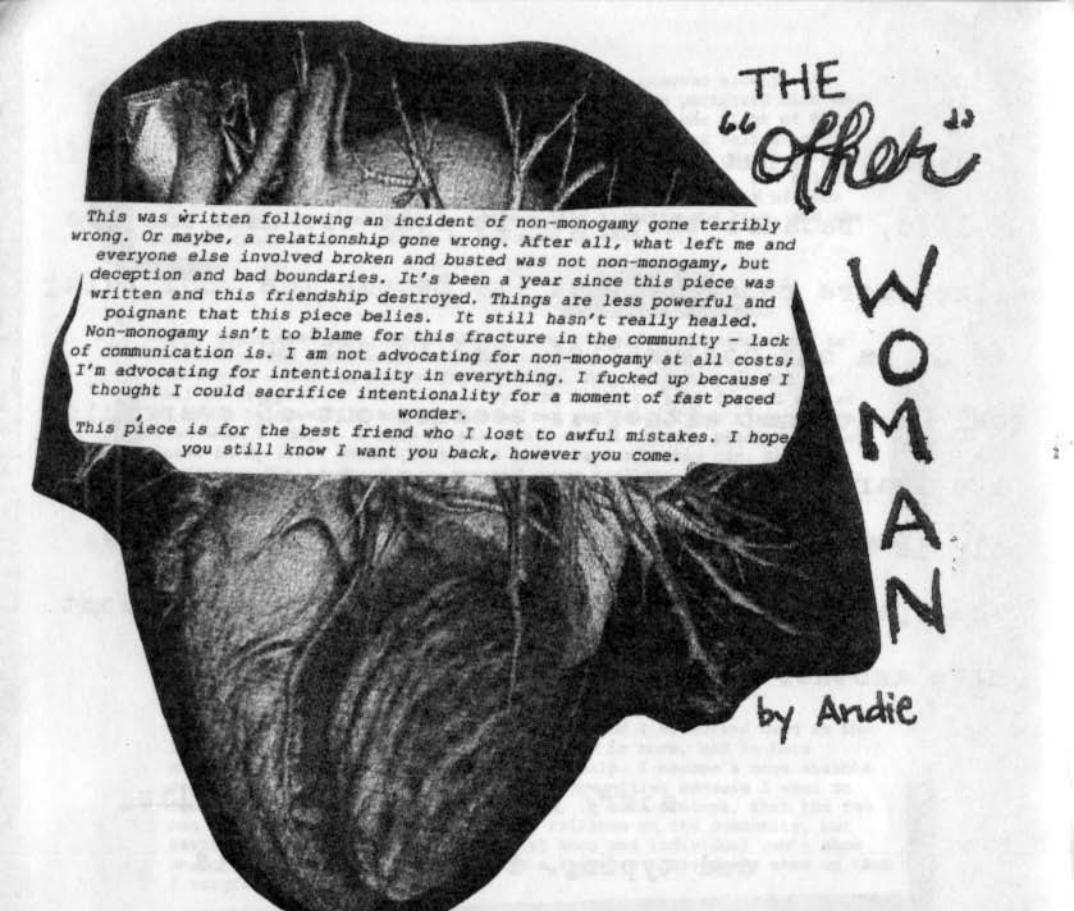
and now i'm re-evaluating mon monogamy in this current situation. its the first time since i dated M that i feel so un sure about poly stuff. and i dont

know what that means for me right now. i know that i need to learn how to change my patterns if this is what i really want and i know i need to figure more of myself out around this stuff. because its more than re-evaluating polyamory but more about re-evaluating my identities that are so deeply rooted in mon monogamy, poly amory, and my relationships as sociated within all that. i'm not just talking about fucking or flirting or dating. i'm talking about leather, sm, friends that i sometimes want to kiss and coming home to my partner...

i used to think that poly stuff was just a way of life, because that's how it felt for me. but i've realized more recently that it's become the cool thing to do in our communities. and i'm not sure how i feel about that either... because out of everything i've learned in the past six years is that being poly is a hell of a lot harder and more work than what people think it is... and ... well... i don't have another and.

Sorry for the shitty spelling  
and typing. i didn't edit this  
i just sat down and typed.

jaks.



# THE "Other"

This was written following an incident of non-monogamy gone terribly wrong. Or maybe, a relationship gone wrong. After all, what left me and everyone else involved broken and busted was not non-monogamy, but deception and bad boundaries. It's been a year since this piece was written and this friendship destroyed. Things are less powerful and poignant than this piece belies. It still hasn't really healed. Non-monogamy isn't to blame for this fracture in the community - lack of communication is. I am not advocating for non-monogamy at all costs, I'm advocating for intentionality in everything. I fucked up because I thought I could sacrifice intentionality for a moment of fast paced wonder.

This piece is for the best friend who I lost to awful mistakes. I hope you still know I want you back, however you come.

W  
O  
M  
A  
N

by Andie

You never could have convinced me, at any point in my life, that I would be the other woman. There is a mythology around this role, and I'm as familiar as anyone with the way the story goes. The other woman is a seductress, a home wrecker, a wanton nymphomaniac who has no regard for the Holy Grail that is love.

I could not, cannot, be the other woman because I was not, am not, even a sexual being. The other woman is explicitly sexual, it is the basis of her identity. Only a woman so overtly and uncompromisingly sexual could possibly overcome her innate drive to seek comfort and monogamy enough to become the most feared and wretched creature: the other woman.

Recent developments in the Other Woman narrative have lessened her overt demonization and replaced it with pitiable victimhood. She is the woman who just can't have a man any other way. The woman who might like to be someone's one and only, but she can't. She's lacking that *je ne sais croire* that you need if you want to be the girl of someone's (lifelong) dreams. And, poor wretch, she'll get what's coming to her when our hero finally decides to reconcile with the girl next door and the other woman gets her comeuppance, has to deal with the stark reality of not ever being quite enough.

And while it might be true that I have never been quite enough, and also true that I am rarely the girl chosen for lifelong (or even temporary) happily ever after, it absolutely cannot be true that I am the other woman.

# But. I AM.

When did it start looking like this? When it stopped being puppy dog unrequited crushes? When sex became something we were more willing to do (because we didn't

have to sneak off somewhere to avoid our parents, or our roommates, or . . .)? When we all thought this whole non-monogamy idea might actually hold some water? When I came out and lines became so much muddier?

Because I've always been your pal. I've always been the one you dated when you didn't have anyone else. I've always been that girl, the one who would take care of you, or who you could curl up next to, or who would give you whatever you wanted whenever you asked. I've always been that. But you so rarely asked for sex, and when you did you were certain to be some shit-head who would just stop calling or act distant and reserved when I saw you at parties. If you cared about me you kept it clean. You loved me, maybe fell in love, but you didn't ruin it with sex. And maybe that ruined me, but it kept it a lot less complicated too.

Now I'm losing it. Losing friends, losing my mind, losing my understanding of who and what I am, losing my principles and my ethics. I'm not willing to make these sacrifices just to feel your body next to mine. The problem is, I didn't know that the stakes were this high. No one told me. I thought we both understood what we were doing, how it would work.

I got so used to fucking people I didn't care about. It was such a nice change to respect the people I was sleeping with, to know that they respected me. It didn't matter to me if I wasn't always in love with these people, because I liked them and I was having fun. That was enough. It was okay with me to keep the people I really adored at an arm's length. Sometimes it hurt and sometimes it made me feel lonely and unwanted. But I learned what to do with that.

And then I felt like maybe things were changing again. I thought, maybe I will love you and you will love me back and we will sleep together. It will work out like everyone told me it would, eventually.

But it continues to elude me.

Right now I am feeling a little unloved. I am wondering what I did in some past life to bring about the current course of my life. That must be the explanation, right? Why else would I continue to end up in these situations where everyone gets hurt and no one is happy? Because I'm not trying to fuck up. That's not to say I haven't done things I shouldn't have, but I never wanted it to turn out like this: a pile of people all broken, all bitter and jealous of one another.

I didn't trust my judgment when I met you. I was at the end of the phase in my life when I thought that what I was seeing, what I was reading must have been wrong. And even if I'm not convinced that you or anyone could love me or want to fuck me, I also know now that that's not entirely true. And I believe that you wanted me then, you want me now, you've wanted me in the interim. I don't know why you made the choices you did, because I would have taken all you would have given me. I still would, and in fact I did. It just wasn't what I wanted.

I wonder now how things might have turned out if I'd said something different that night all drunk and sloppy and tear filled playing pool. If I would have guessed myself instead of that other girl when you said you had a crush on someone. But I let my fear get the best of me and I guess I probably still would. Because even then I loved you enough to have you any way I could. Maybe I knew it all along, that you would be another in the long line of best friends who I have adored so fiercely but never dated or slept with or really let myself fall in love with. And that's okay; that's not where I fucked up this time or anytime before. Not really.

In the worst of these moments I wish that that fear had stayed with me. I wish I would have just let it play the way it always has. I wish I had never kissed you and you'd never kissed me. I wish I had let myself feel unloved and unwanted and lonely a little bit longer, maybe I would have held out without destroying myself.

But I didn't. I'm still lonely and unloved.  
And I miss you.

I want to say: come back. Come back I'll take you anyway you come. Come back and we can forget that it all happened the way it did. We can start over and the lines can never get fuzzy, it can all stay in perfect black and white relief, lines sharp and clear and cold.

I know it wouldn't though. It wouldn't even if it maybe could. There are 1,000 reasons why it won't work like that now. It won't because something got terribly destroyed and distorted. I don't know where, exactly. Somewhere in between that note I wrote and pushed across the table at you and that phone call you made because you couldn't bear to see my face when you told me we couldn't be friends. Not for a while. Maybe not ever again. And so I have to believe that this was the way it was supposed to turn out. I have to believe that because I can't track or monitor all the mistakes we made, it would make me crazy. I have to believe

that because thinking of what we could have done to change the trajectory is just too overwhelming.

So maybe I am the other woman, the sad and pitiable one who can't have you any other way. But it's different because I never would have asked you to choose. I am saying take me for what I am and what I can give you. I am saying I know I'm not her and I can't give you what she can. I'm saying I never expected you to find wholeness in me. I'm saying this is too complex for one-word answers.

I don't feel like you choose her over me. I feel like you chose a flawed and dubious concept over me. And that's worse. It's not your commitment to another person that burns me, it's your commitment to something I don't believe in and I don't think you believe in either.

I know there are always choices. I know that it's not monogamy's fault that we failed. Your easy answer was to take yourself away from me; my easy answer is to blame some obscure system. Maybe now we know where the chips have always lain.

I know I'm hurt because I keep coming up with plans for when we're back the way we were, even though I know that will never happen. I'm not saying we're through. That's a burden I can't stand to bear just yet, its truth be damned. I'm just saying we won't ever function like we used to. And mostly that's for the best. But there are things we'll never have back that I will miss for the rest of my life. There is a part of you, and a part of me, a part of we, that is gone forever. We killed it. It's not coming back.

I'm sad because you're gone. I miss the regularity of you in my life. I miss the context that we used to share. I miss the friendships we shared and how we shared them. I miss our friends and their mutual relations to us. I miss our grandiose plans.

I'm sad because this means I keep fucking up in the same way. I'm sad because this means something in the universality of my life; it means something I don't want it to. It means I will continue to speak the parabolic monologues I always have: No One will ever love me the way I want them to.



That's the lesson learned.  
No One Will Ever Love Me the way I Want Them To.  
You're one more example.  
Comeuppance received.

## Silence Fails Me Every Time

By Shannon

I don't know what it looks like to be in a healthy open relationship. I wish I did. What I want to tell you here is all the examples of open relationships that surround me, the ones I've been in and the ones that people close to me are in. I don't want to talk theoretical anymore. Because that's where non-monogamy works for me, in the theory. When I lay out the ideas what I'm not really doing is getting at that feeling in my chest that says "something's wrong here". Sometimes I think we get to hide in the theory. We get to hide in the things we don't talk about. The examples of non-monogamy in my life are mostly of ones where people are hiding. We don't talk about the assumptions we let be made or the times when the commitment to all of that openness, honesty and trust didn't "work out", or rather left us feeling abandoned, betrayed and/or hurt. I think we all feel really protective of non-monogamy, because the mainstream is very critical of polyamory and non-monogamy. I know we want to keep it close to us, not let it be taken away. Most of the mainstream counter arguments I've seen are sex negative, homophobic, body negative, heterosexist, misogynistic and about capitalism. What I want to offer is an internal critic. I'm not trying to take anything away from anyone. I'm trying to expand, open up and explore how we relate to each other, love each other and create alternative forms of sexuality with personal and political agency within a racist, patriarchal, homophobic, sexist, ableist, classist society.

What I see is that reaction, the fear that someone is trying to take something from us, so we become overprotective, we start to police the boarders in order to keep ourselves safe. What we've learned time and time again is that policing boarders does not keep us safe, it doesn't protect us but rather isolates and smothers us. We start policing the very spaces we need in order to exist.

I guess that I don't get to talk about other people in this zine. I don't get to say how non-monogamy works for them. I do want to say what I've seen. I've seen a lot of pain. I know it might be hard to take my word for it because I am someone who's experienced a lot of pain around non-monogamy. But I know I am not alone.

Flashes, images of the next day, the aftermath, the drinking, clubs, keep flashing through my head. I want to tell you the stories I've told a million times. I want to tell you about the times I've seen us lie right to each other's faces while saying that we're trying. Maybe I'm just writing this for some big audience and maybe I'm just writing it for my friends. Because it is about my personal experiences but it's also about how those experiences contribute to and are filtered through the larger screen of all of us. I don't live in a vacuum and neither do you. My life affects your life and visa-versa. How you experience your open relationship affects how I experience mine, not only because in this

small Denver community your ex is probably dating mine or our ex's have slept together and he fucked her while you two were ending/starting/transitioning but because they are contributing to larger community dynamics that become bigger than me very very fast.

And what about privacy? I actually believe it's essential for our relationships to flourish. But what are we keeping to ourselves and why? Maybe it's time for us to look at the ways in which we gossip, how hurtful that is to all of us. I know that I've kept my process around my sexual relationships private in the past because I fear snooping and manipulation. I fear that if certain people have too much information they'll use it to control pieces of my relationship. Because we do have investments in each other's relationships, especially when so many of us are or have had sexual relationships with each other. This is the nitty-gritty that I don't know how to do differently.

How do we hold each other accountable? What if you are in an open relationship (or maybe we don't even have language that specific, what if you are regularly sleeping with someone) and someone cheats on you? What if you sleep with someone outside of agreed upon boundaries? What do you say? How do we have these conversations? How do we do this in a new way? We don't always know what we're doing and we're going to screw up. Sleeping with someone or deceptions outside of agreed upon parameters is cheating. Maybe this piece is really about something else. Maybe this piece is really about how we're all connected, about how we construct our queer communities. Maybe it's about how to have ethical sexual relationships in small interdependent, interrelated communities. Maybe that's connected but different than a conversation about non-monogamy as a whole. What I really want is to talk about it. Silence around our sexual relationships doesn't not feel very radical or sex positive to me. It all still does feel very quiet and secretive. It's that silence that always has, and continues to fuel shame around sex, our bodies and our relationships. It's that internalized homophobia that keeps our relationships quiet, private, just ours. I exist in a queer community where the dynamics of most people's relationships are a complete mystery to me. I know what part of that is about. I know that sometimes the only way for relationships to feel sustainable in such a small community is to keep them close to us, is to keep people, gossip out of our lives. What price do we pay for this? What sacrifices are we making, especially in our ability to learn from each other and to share our processes? I really do believe that sharing the hard stuff will make us all stronger, when we share where we fucked up and how we're learning to do it differently.

Every explanation has a contradiction I'm not ready to get inside of. I want to be able to outline it all for you. I'm too close to my own process to neatly wrap it up in a several paragraph package for you. I'm resisting the desire to "tell all". I want to fight back against the pain, the secrecy, the signs between the interactions by telling you what he did. or she saw, or I heard. This is information as power. This

is not my job. This is the same trap I'm trying to unlearn. I make it about you then I become so small I lose myself. I want to fight back against sexual shame and invisibility. I want to fight back by living my life as a whole person, whether you think that's possible or not. I just want to be seen. I want us all to experience ourselves as the beautiful, amazing, inspiring people we all are. I want to figure out how monogamy and non-monogamy fit into me as a whole person. I want to figure out how to relate to you and see you. I want monogamy and non-monogamy to be just some of the tools and ways of learning, not the things standing in our way.

I wanted to tell you about examples of non-monogamy in my life. What I really tried to say is how I have more questions than examples or answers. This piece is really about how I'm confused scared and searching for answers. When I first wrote this piece it was long, processy and about my ex C, our on-again-off-again relationship, what happened, what didn't and why it still fucks me up. It was about his ex and about how talking about their relationship and negotiations around non-monogamy always feels so loaded and scary. It was about how I carry this pain around with me all the time. It was about all the crazy that lived in those relationships and how I play that crazy out over and over. It was about all those triggers for me and how when I see my ex and the new person he's kissing on (one of our tries at practicing non-monogamy) my heart starts pounding so loud that it's all I can hear and tears come to my eyes without me even realizing it. It was about how that pain has become synonymous with non-monogamy. But that was too much to share with you, it feels so personal and loaded. It feels volatile, my reactions feel volatile. Someday I want to be able to tell these stories, talk about the lessons, remember the love and fold it into the things that make up who I am and get me where I'm going. That day is not today but maybe it'll be tomorrow, or a week from now or even a year from now. Maybe it'll be my next surrender and release. I have to trust that this is where I'm going and this is how I get there.

11/18/11 2011  
Contractual Agreements

The relationship I am currently in began with a contract.

Yes. Really. A contract.

This is only one of the statements that evoke unease when I start talking about who I date and how. Usually people chuckle nervously and change the subject. Which is probably for the best, because if I continued, their freak out would only continue to progress.

As a result, I don't have the same narrative for this relationship that a lot of people have. "Oh, well, we met when . . . and our first date was . . . and I knew I was really in love when . . ." And even if the audience of said tale is bored or annoyed, they listen and smile sweetly at the appropriate moments. If I tried to tell the story of my longest recognized relationship, people would walk away or look really horrified. Like people usually do when others tell them seemingly awful stories in a sort of blasé and amused manner.

She asked me for the contract. I complied primarily to call her bluff, and also because I am far more confident about my ability to write a paper than I am in my ability to date someone. During the conversation that followed the production of the contract (sometimes referred to as our "first date") I off handedly mentioned that I kind of hoped the rest of our relationship might grow more "organically" (because beneath the radical queer, I'm still kind of a hippy) and she explained that organic relationships are bullshit, and anything productive and worthwhile was planned out and proscribed. I did not view this perspective as cold hearted or mean spirited. I saw its validity even though I wasn't entirely on board.

The contract wasn't real; you should know that. While there were roman numerals and indented paragraphs outlining the number of phone calls allowed per week, the use of pet names, and the logistics of dates, very little of it actually informed our relationship. That wasn't the point. The point was that both of us were thinking of this relationship as something important enough to us to invest thought into - thought about what we wanted, what we needed, and what we were willing to give.

The one part of the contract that has proved binding is the section on "other parties outside the scope of the agreement." I took it for granted that our relationship would be non-monogamous, in part because she was already involved with someone when I awkwardly spit out my crush on her, but also because I couldn't fathom having a relationship any other way. And while I am open to the frequency of dates, and the number of phone calls per week allowed, and even the use of annoying pet names changing, I feel fairly strongly that a relationship that is not intentionally and articulately open is not a relationship that I want to be in right now.

Our relationship has evolved quite a bit since we signed that contract two years ago. In a lot of ways, the relationship has developed in what could be termed an "organic" fashion. We have not revisited or amended the contract, and really only refer to it as a passing joke. But the legacy of that initial contract has lived on in our relationship, and its this legacy that is probably the cause for the relationship's longevity and, if you'll allow me, success.

We have gone through a lot of stages in our relationship. I don't pretend that we are unique in this respect. But every single one of those stages has been prefaced with a reasonably heart wrenching conversation, and a number of agreements about what needed to change, how we might change it, and whether or not those changes would still meet our individual needs. And throughout each stage, we have spent time checking in about the success of our changes, and when things needed changing again, we went through the whole process again.

The result is that we have spent a lot of time in our relationship dealing with hard shit. I have shed a lot of tears. There have been a lot of days when I felt awful and wondered why I did not pursue my halfhearted daydream of moving to an isolated shack with only my dog. This doesn't work with how a lot of people understand relationships and their function in our collective lives. The mainstream understanding of relationships (at least, the one I got via TV and movies) is that one falls in love with the perfect person, and from that point forward, life is no longer difficult and all problems are solved within the safety of said perfect person's arms.

I let go of that ideal a long time ago (or, at least, I let go of it on a cognitive and rational level. It still lives inside of me in sneaky little ways.) I have never imagined that any relationship would complete me, and, frankly, the thought that one might fucking terrifies me. I understand my relationships as a tool to help me be a better human being, I understand them as experiments for figuring out how to undo the bullshit I was taught as a kid, I view them as productive projects for making the world a better place and maybe also as a diversion from other parts of my life.

This doesn't mean that I don't have an awesome time when I date people. It doesn't mean I don't really enjoy having sex. It doesn't mean that I don't have feelings that feel totally outside of rationality about other people.

But it does mean that I want to be in a relationship that will push my buttons, make me uncomfortable, let me fuck up in a safe space, figure some shit out. And I can't do all of that unless I know what I want and need, and I know that the person I'm dating is on the same page as me. Those goals are too lofty, leave me too open to pain, are too intense, to be left open to the whims of the world. Making agreements, writing contracts and conforming to schedules helps me do all of that. And I'm willing to sacrifice whatever "magic" or "romance" might occasionally exist in order to achieve those goals.

But maybe I'm finding my magic elsewhere. I'm finding it in the moments when I feel able to say when I'm hurt, and that pain isn't met with shock or anger, but with understanding and concern. I'm finding it when I can articulate what I need, and those needs are met or at least there is an attempt to meet them. I'm finding it in the creation of a relationship that doesn't look like what I've always seen, that makes other people nervous, that questions the status quo, and still makes me feel alive, and yes, even in love.

My community is too small, too interwoven, for anything but clarity. Only two of us signed the contract that night, but its reverberations have reached into other lives. I'm a private person when it comes to relationships, but its foolish and harmful for me to think that the way I relate to one person in the community won't inform the ways I relate to other people; that the relationships I'm in won't impact the community as a whole.

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Contracts may not turn you on; they may not be sweet and perversely endearing, as was my case. You don't have to outline the frequency of your calls to your partner(s) or friends. But when you know what you're doing and where you stand, you can figure out where you're going. There is some sort of magic in that.

## Stories I Tell Myself

By Shannon

I'm not new at non-monogamy. That's just a story I tell myself. I've never actually been in a committed monogamous relationship. I've had relationships that have been monogamous at times but I've never been in a committed romantic sexual relationship that hasn't at some point been open. I think I forgot that. Lately, I feel like such a monogamy proponent, and that's mostly because I was interested in monogamy in my last relationship. But that one relationship is not my universal. Last night I was talking with my friend Amelia and it hit me; I'm not actually new at this.

What's new is the language, the intention and the politics. What's new is these specific community dynamics. I want to tell you the story of my first relationships, of my first sexual experiences. This story says so much to me about myself as a sexual person, it so well describes how I'm both a prude and kinky. Basically, I'm a prude until I'm not, and once I'm not I want to have kinky, hot, dirty, varied sex. I'm always afraid that no one can hold that space for me. I'm afraid I have to be one or the other.

I was 17 and it was my senior year in high school. I've had a kiss or two here and there but I've never even made out with anyone. I'm playing one of the leads in our school's production of Grease. All the characters of this story are there, in the production, on the crew, singing from the sidelines. My friend group is this click of 3 other amazing, supportive and fabulous women. The four of us are a team and our friendships build primarily through a mutual commitment to our school's choir. It's the most amazing girl solidarity I've ever had and continues to influence me in all of these positive ways. Jess is the one I'm currently closest with. We are two fat girls with surprising fat solidarity for anytime in our lives but especially for high school. Jess is my support but she's also my idol. I've often put her up on a pedestal. She's wicked smart, talented, and probably the wittiest person I've ever known. She's an amazing singer. Seriously, the way this girl

could sing blew everyone away. Jess and I also looked very similar, two fat girls with long brown hair and similar builds. I have this choir picture that was taken on this day where Jess and I dressed up as each other. It was supposed to be a witty pun but no one really got it. We looked the same as we did everyday just wearing each other's clothes.

Jess and I were tight. We spent night after night driving around our suburb talking and waiting for something to happen. I sometimes forget just how much of my sexual development happened in relation to Jess. I think that's partly because we never really talked about a lot of things, including our attraction to each other (very soon in the future Jess becomes the first girl I have sex with). I'm not sure how it all started but through our many conversations Jess and I come to realize that we both had a sexual attraction to a member of the cast, Elliott. Thinking back, and even at the time I'm not sure what the sexual attraction was. Elliot wasn't really all that attractive and faced with him now I would probably never give him a second glance. The best way I can describe Elliot is as a bear. He was big, loud and hairy but you know not a gay man (at least not that I know of). But Elliott was an amazing sexual partner. He was my first top, surprisingly good at talking about sex, and he held more open sexual space for me than most sexual partners ever have.

Jess and I both confessed our desires to sleep with Elliott. Then comes the twist. Through a series of conversations we decide that we can both have sex with Elliott. I mean why not? I can't for the life of me tell you why we decided this, why we decided to work together instead of compete. Because girl socialization would tell you to get catty and secretive, to gossip and to cut each other down. For me it's a testament to having each other's backs, the primary commitment was to support each other not necessarily to getting laid. It was her support that made this all possible for me. Without her involvement I never would have slept with Elliott. I always felt clear that she had my back. She processed with me. It was somehow ok that I had never had sex that I had never even made out with anyone. That inexperience wasn't

seen as a detriment. And that's exactly what I needed. I needed, what I always need, which is a system of support. There was something about the fact that Jess also had a sexual relationship with Elliott that made that so much more doable for me.

So Jess and I sit down and work out a plan. We decide to bring our proposal to Elliott. Jess, being the more sexually confident one brought it up first. We never all sat down in a room together and discussed it, well at least not at first, and never formally. Most of this conversation happened over instant messenger. I mean, I was in high school; this is where my sexual communication skills were at. All three of us would be online and Jess would copy me pieces of their conversation and Elliott and I would talk to each other. This was seven years ago. I don't remember all the details, the exact boundaries we set up. I know that we had a fairly formal system put in place, one that relied primarily on Jess and I effectively communicating what days would work for each of us. (And that right there is more structure to non-monogamy than I've had since). My memory is a little fuzzy but the feelings are still clear. I remember what it felt like, which was that it felt scary and new. I felt unsure and young. It felt exciting and hot, and in the end it felt hard and sometimes hurtful. The tag line I always say about Elliott was that he was a great sexual partner but not always the best person. And it's funny how a story I thought was about Elliott and the sex we had has now become about Jess and I's friendship.

**Part II**

I never know how to tell this story, if it makes sense linearly or not. I'm not sure I could even tell it linearly even if I wanted to. I actually keep these pieces of my life in really separate places, with the intellectual understanding that they happened simultaneously. At the same time, or just before, I started a flirtation with Matt (not the big Matt that broke my heart, for any of you who've heard that story a million times over). Matt was the perfect high school boyfriend. He had spiky black hair, tips he dyed various colors although they were red for most of the time we dated. He sang lead and

played the guitar in a ska band. He held my hand, called me at night, brought me flowers and adored me. He followed me everywhere and he probably liked me in different ways than I liked him. Somewhere over the course of the play I developed a crush on Matt. I remember eyeing him at the cast party when he took off his shirt for a haircut. A week before prom we started dating and I can't for the life of me remember how, who said what, what we decided. But it was clear that we were boyfriend and girlfriend. Matt was my first kiss-kiss and the first person I ever made out with. (Look for the amazing, hilarious, and embarrassing story of our first kiss in a future issue of my zine From Here To There And Back Again).

Again, I don't remember the order but I knew fairly early into our relationship that he wanted a deeper level of commitment than I did. He wanted a girlfriend to go to shows with and to watch his band practices. He wanted someone to call at night and hold hands with down the halls. I wanted to experiment and try new things. I wanted adventures and to push my edges. He also wanted me to be his picturesque punk rock girlfriend, and someone who I wasn't. This is also my first committed sexual relationship. I had one formal boyfriend before Matt and when he wanted to kiss me I broke up with him. As with my life now, most romantic/sexual relationships were never that defined, only taking formal structure in order to tell the stories later, to add words to the feelings, thoughts and situations. About a month into our relationship I write Matt a letter that essentially says "I can't be with you and no one else" (direct quote). For me that felt really clear. With hindsight I can see that I was just starting to form the language of non-monogamy. What I wanted was a more casual relationship and what I couldn't do was be his picturesque girlfriend. I was graduating high school in a month and going off to college in the fall. I was going through a major transition in my life and I knew I wasn't in a place to do that with Matt. I wanted the possibility to spend time with him and explore with him with the understanding that at the time I couldn't commit to more. What I didn't do was accurately communicate that with him.

I thought my letter was clear but we by no means talked about having an open relationship. I'm pretty sure there wasn't the space for that, or at least it didn't feel like it to me. At the time I thought I was clean, I thought I had communicated my truth and we were good to go. His response was something like; well of course, I don't want tie you down, do what you need to do. I think he thought what I needed was to have space with my friends and time to get ready to go to college. What he didn't know was that I wanted to explore a sexual relationship with someone else.

So I graduate from high school. Matt and I are dating and Jess, Elliott and I have worked out an agreement. Elliott's actually overjoyed with the plan. I mean he is a high school boy, a year younger than us who's just had two girls come to him with a proposal that they both want to have sexual relationships with him. Jess hooks up with Elliott and a week later Elliott and I make a date to 'hang out'. The day after graduation he drives me home from this post graduation party. We're sitting in the car outside of my house, we start making out, listening to a mix he made. And it's hot. For the first time as a sexual person I'm into what I'm doing. I'm scared and don't really know what I'm doing but my body is definitely reacting. Then his hand goes for my pants. I'm not sure if he asked or not, it's very possible because my memory of Elliott is of someone who was better than I expected around consent, especially from a het high school boy. It was definitely not the sexual script.

Elliott fingers me and it's hot. It's slightly weird because I'm sitting down, wearing jeans and we're parked in front of my dad's house. At the time I didn't know how to adjust and guide him where he needed to be. But without much guidance from me he did pretty well on his own. I don't think I came but after awhile the sexual interaction is done and I go inside.

I think it's important to remember that a month before this I'd never even made out with anyone. I was just discovering my body's reaction to the sexual touch of other's. I

remember how much it surprised me how wet I got after making out. There are so many other stories from this time. I want to tell you more about the kinds of sex that Elliott and I had while knowing that they don't really fit into the scope of this piece. Actually, these sexual experiences are really important to me, they were some of my most exciting, satisfying and extensive I've had with non-trans guys, particularly straight non-trans guys. There were all these ways that these sexual interactions followed the het script but more ways in which they really really didn't. The kinds of sex I had with Elliott were so queer. I would go to his house, we would make out and often he would get me off and I'd go home. Elliott was the first person to ever go down on me; he was the first person to ever do a lot of sexual things with me. Our sexual interactions were often about my pleasure. He was really good at checking in and while I felt insecure about my level of sexual experience I also felt supported by him.

Elliott was not my boyfriend. We were friends. We wouldn't really cuddle after sex but we'd sit there and talk and chat then I'd sneak out of his house and go home. Once I went over to Elliott's place for a one hour booty call in which Jess dropped me off and picked me up an hour later. I was wearing a skirt and I left with my underwear in my purse. This mostly makes me think that maybe the person that I am now isn't so foreign. For most of my life I've been pushing for ways to do it differently, to find ways to be a whole person in a society that keeps fractioning me off. I think this story is really about my 17 year old self trying to do that, learning how my sexuality exists in the world. And at that time it existed like this.

After a while it became clear that Matt and I had different understanding of what "I can't be with you and no one else" meant. We talk and I make it explicitly clear that I'm in a sexual relationship with someone else. For Matt and I, this is the beginning of the end. I tell him that I'm still invested in my relationship with him. I tell him that my sexual relationship with Elliott doesn't mean I don't want to be with him. And he says no, that he needs to be exclusive, that he'll

"forgive" me and we can stay together if I'm only willing to stop my sexual relationship with Elliott. I can't agree to that and it breaks his heart. It's not that I chose Elliott over Matt, in fact Elliott and I's sexual relationship stopped soon after this conversation. It was the principle and practice; it was the structure I thought that choice would create.

And it wasn't perfect. I don't want to pretend that it all felt good or that there weren't feelings of jealousy of inadequacy because there were. There were hurt feelings and feelings of rejection. In the end Elliott fell pretty hard for Jess. He used words like "in love". Jess and Elliott never formally dated but their sexual relationship did continue after Elliott and I's stopped. The original agreement was that this was supposed to be casual and fun, that our friendships were the priority. We agreed to continue this arrangement until it didn't work anymore. There was the mutual trust and commitment that when this no longer was working for anyone we would communicate that and stop. That's sort of what happened. Partway through the summer it becomes clear that Elliott had developed some pretty deep feelings for Jess. Instead of telling me that he wants to stop sleeping together he just kind of becomes an asshole. He stops returning my calls and starts ignoring me. Through a single instant messenger conversation we basically end our sexual relationship. He beats around the bush and I lay it out on the table. I say "It seems like you're done with our sexual relationship. Is that true?" And still he can't say it. So I tell him that it's ok, that this is supposed to be casual and it seems like its not working anymore. And really, it was ok. I felt a bit hurt and this particular turnout pushed a lot of my buttons about playing sexual second fiddle to my more talented and beautiful friends. But I wasn't heartbroken, it didn't fuck me up. Elliott and I didn't do emotional work together and while there were levels of vulnerability in my sexual inexperience they didn't hit intimacy buttons for me. Years after all was said and done Elliott pulled me aside and apologized for his behavior. It was a nice gesture but I

was so over it that it didn't hold as much weight as it would have years earlier.

What I'm trying to understand is why I don't "count" this when I think about non-monogamy. The more I talk with the people in my lives the more common I see this phenomenon. Often, lots of people who wouldn't consider themselves polyamorous or "into" non-monogamy have had various kinds of non-exclusive sexual relationships. For me the differences are intention, communication, structure and language.

Then why is it so hard to talk about? Why can I fall into open relationships throughout every part of my sexual development but when I sit down and formally try to negotiate a committed open relationship it feels like everything comes crashing down? Because I want that intention. The kinds of casual assumed non-monogamy I've described here has been so common in my life. What is new is a group/community of people who are putting thought, practice and intention onto this practice in my life. Why does it feel so scary when it's so many of us doing this?

Negotiating non-monogamy changes my relationship to it. I keep thinking that intention is supposed to make things easier. It does and it doesn't. Doing our work isn't always easy. I keep making the same mistakes over and over again. Experience seems to be the only way I learn how to do it differently. I keep falling into the same old patterns. I repeat the hurtful patterns until they don't serve me anymore. Non-monogamy has been this process and often it feels exhausting. Right now, its one of the few tools I have in figuring out how to relate to you. Through everything I trust myself, I trust my emotions, what feels true inside. That's what I keep falling back on, my trust in myself and the process. Sometimes that means I follow passion into heartbreak. It also means that I can follow experience into trying something new and not repeating old hurts. That means that I'll also continue to live my contradictions and find spaces for all of these dichotomies. I'm both scared and confident. I'm kinky and a prude. I'm here and far away. I'm whole and I'm fractioned.



And finally I'm the same and always changing. These are all part of the stories I tell myself. The stories change depending on context and listener, what I think you want to hear. I'm trying to find the right stories and the best listeners but more than anything I'm learning that sometimes it doesn't matter exactly what words I use as long as they're my truth.

Not Polyamorous as in Hippie, Non-Monogamous as in  
What the Fuck?

Originally printed in the Growler Distro Catalogue, Winter 2007  
Modified for this zine

I haven't really made any friends at school since I started this fall. It doesn't bother me so much, cos I have a lot of friends already, but every once in a while I'll be eating my little sandwich in the student lounge, and I'll hear other people exchanging not funny grad school jokes, and I'll feel a little lonely.

So I was kind of excited when a group of people asked me to come to lunch with them during the break in our weekend class. I wasn't entirely sure if they were "my people," but at that moment I didn't feel like I could be very choosey, and they wanted to go to Jerusalem's for falafel, which was a good sign. Besides, now that I had officially signed myself up for this seminary thing, I probably needed to rethink that concept of "my people." I'd had a couple of awkward between class conversations with one of the women in the group, and I had assessed from these brief exchanges that she was queer and political, and I figured that even if she wasn't queer or political like I was, we'd have something to talk about.

And so I found myself sitting at a cramped table scooping up hummus trying to do my best to engage in the conversation, which for the most part was about the course we were taking on theology and homosexuality. Gradually, the conversation moved from the academic to the personal, which was when my almost-friend made a reference to her polyamorous relationship.

And also when my stomach dropped and my mouth shut.

On my way home that evening, I thought more about that moment. I hadn't shut this woman down, but I'd also distanced myself from the conversation out of what could only qualify as discomfort. But for the last three years I've been on the same staunchly political non-monogamy bandwagon as the rest of the radical queers in Denver. All of my recent relationships have been open. I've been a shameless wanton hussy, and I haven't been too shy about sharing it. What the fuck?

For as much as I've paid lip service to the benefits of non-monogamy, for as much as I've processed my jealousy, set up boundaries, and worked on creating the kind of relationships that I want in my life, I still can't quite handle the details of a non-monogamous "identity."

Maybe there are elements of internalized homophobia - I don't want to complete people's stereotypes of sex obsessed and unstable homos. Maybe I'm still sort of afraid that this non-monogamy stuff is just taking what I can get, which I still maybe believe isn't much (and maybe I still believe that non-monogamous relationships "aren't much.") Maybe I'm still afraid of aligning myself with the stereotypes associated with non-monogamy - hip swinging bisexuals, disco porn, hippie nature pagan couples, "free love" gone weird and bad, sexist asshole dudes who want to fuck over multiple women at once. And all of those remaining fears mean that as much as I claim openness and support for lives that don't look like mine, I'm still a shitty one-dimensional asshole.

On the upside, another classmate of mine recently came out to our class as polyamorous via e-mail, and I wrote him back with genuine words of support and talked a little about my own relationship as well.

I still don't imagine that what he understands as polyamory in his life looks like mine, but I also figure that if I'm going to talk big about living new models of relationships in my life, I'd damn well better do it everywhere, not just where it feels safest.

Following closely on the heels of both of these experiences, I found myself righteously defending non-monogamy (or, at the least, passionately attempting to) in one of my classes. A class on Christian ethics perhaps isn't the ideal space to talk about one's radical "lifestyle choices," so maybe it was just the perfect storm that spurred some perverse desire to out myself. And sob buckets in the last row of classroom S-101-102.

I don't think that it ever actually occurred to me that I had been given two perfectly safe opportunities to discuss my relationship in school already; I don't think my choices about responding to those opportunities were at the forefront of my mind when my arm shot into the air. But I felt in that moment, I am sure, that I was fucking tired of passing as some vanilla lesbian, I was sick of strangers and friends feeling sorry for me, feeling weird about be, feeling righteous about my choices. I was sick of being over sexualized because of my open relationship, I was sick of tacitly agreeing to the judgments people make about non-monogamy.

So I tried to take a stand. I didn't even get an opportunity to articulate what I wanted to, didn't get to clarify why my professor's assertion that non-monogamous relationships inherently precluded "vulnerability and mutual sharing" was not as simplistically true as he made it out to be. He sidestepped my forays into conversation with three different techniques, and left me instead to puddle into the corner full of frustration, anger, and reification of my worst fears.

Outing yourself is terrifying not only when it involves threats of violence, but also when it mentions exclusion and isolation, and when it forces internal reflection. Coming out as non-monogamous will not likely jeopardize my job, my relationship with my family, my access to resources, or even my potential future. But it distances me from people I love and care about, it places me at the margins in conversations about love, it threatens my understanding of who I am.

And so what if, when I say to my classmate, "Yeah, I'm in an open relationship too" or when I finally let my mom in on the extreme complexities of my relationship, they assume that I'm a hip swinging bisexual or an erotic-mystic free-love child? The damage that really needs to be undone is within how I understand myself. Just in case, though, I'd better get a wicked concept haircut and turn up the punk rock.

Ok, so i (andie) have been charged with creating something wonderful for the...  
uh...

## Filler Page.

That "Something wonderful" is...

### \* \* THINGS SHANNON & I MIGHT BOVER \*

BAM! \* — \* (if we boxed at all) \*  
\* — — BAM! — — BAM! — — BAM! \*

• How many times we've been mistaken for each other.

• Whether or not Shannon cramped Andie's style by getting a lip ring too.

• Who's taller.

• Who has hotter style.

• Who's signature dance move is more fit for "American Idol".

# \* SHANNON'S zines

"From Here to There's Back Again" #1 & #2  
are both available at Not Sorry  
([www.notsorry.org](http://www.notsorry.org)) & Stranger Danger  
([www.strangerdangerdistro.com](http://www.strangerdangerdistro.com))

Write her, please.

# \* ANDIE'S zines, "Already Too

Much; Never Enough" #1 & #2 are  
available from Not Sorry ([www.notsorry.org](http://www.notsorry.org))  
Stranger-Danger ([www.strangerdangerdistro.com](http://www.strangerdangerdistro.com)) &  
Eye Candy distros. Or, you can  
write her a letter & she'll send  
them to you.

\* \* \* \* \*

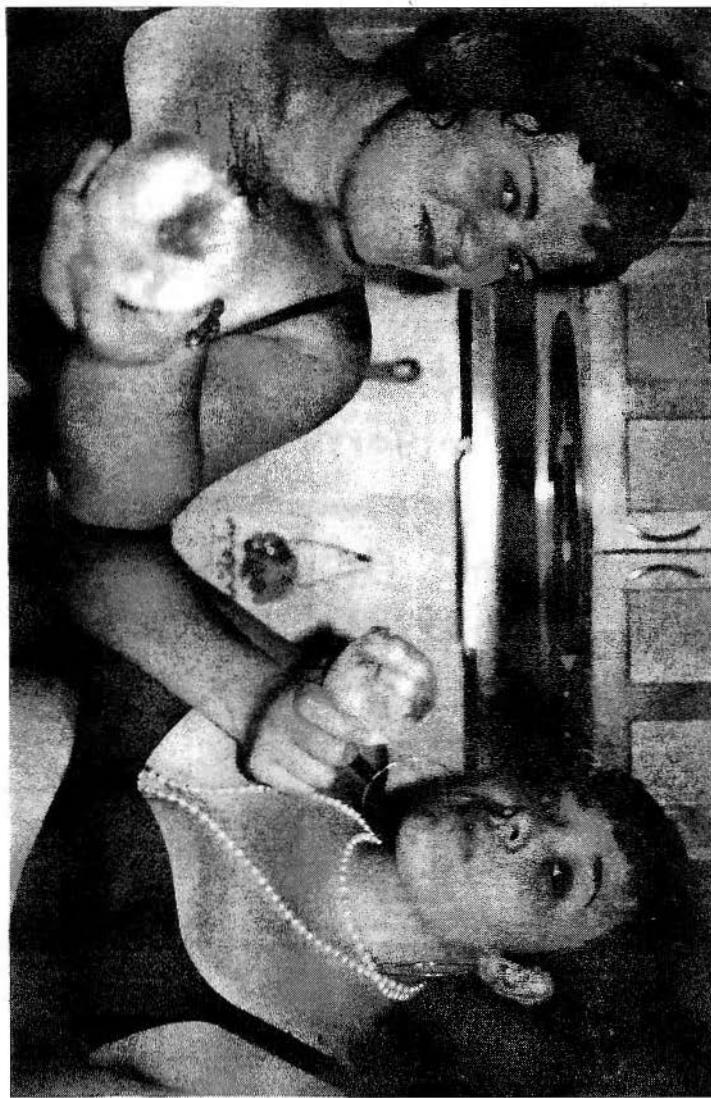
\* WHOA! THANKS to Janny  
from Not Sorry & IB from  
Stranger Danger for distro'ing  
our zines, & writing their own  
totally sweet zines.

PLEASE -

do all yr indie press shopping  
at their distros. Yo, seriously.

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